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HAPPY VALLEY**

by **HARRY F. OLMSTED**

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LEAD AND LIKKER!**

by **BILL GULICK**

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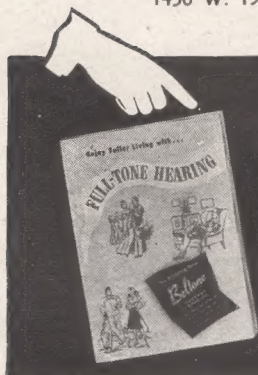
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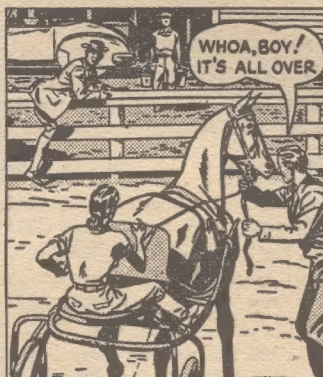
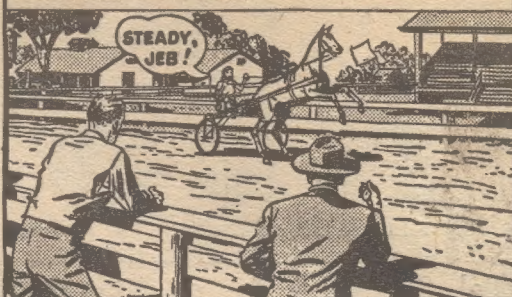
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Vol. 22, No. 4

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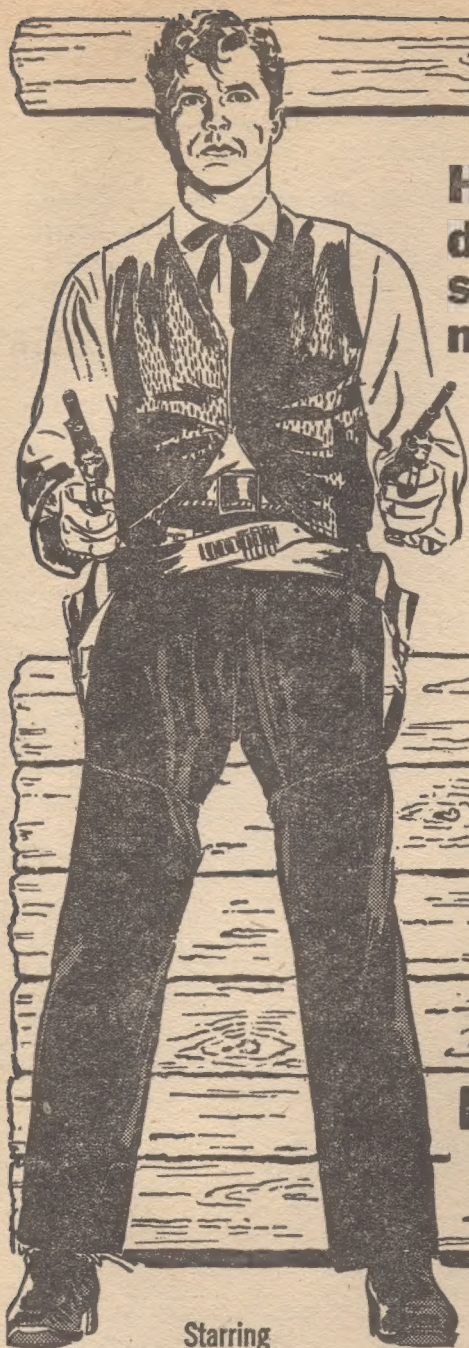
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ROLL 'EM WEST WITH

Chapter I

THE UNHOLY THREE

IN HIS TIME, Dan Little had seen a mite of contrary country, animals and people, but right offhand he couldn't recall when he'd met up with as much concentrated contrariness as was wrapped up in the bulky figure of the Missouri wagon captain Max Hitchcock.

Maybe, Dan brooded, Hitchcock's con-

*Action-Packed Novel
of the Hell-Roaring
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Dan put hot spurs to his horse and headed for the sizzling hail of lead. . . .



LEAD AND LIKKER! • •

By BILL GULICK

trariness stemmed from the fact that the unaccustomed responsibility worried him. Maybe being in love made him more fractious than usual. Or maybe—and this Dan

regarded as more likely—it was just plain damned cussedness.

A chill darkness lay over the river valley where the fifteen wagons were camped

When Dan Little signed on as gun-guide for the treasure-laden Conestoga caravan, he figured he was blotting sign on his twisted, shadowed backtrail. . . . But the perilous Oregon trace held no sanctuary for him nor for a hundred honest, greenhorn emigrants—not with enough barrelled bust-head likker aboard to float that doomed wagon-train into a flaming prairie hell!



for the night. Dan hunkered near the fire, a small, mild-mannered man whose quiet ways had caused more than one person to underestimate him. Hitchcock towered above, his broad face lined with stubbornness.

"You ain't answered my question yet," he snapped at Dan. "Why have we got to keep following the river?"

Dan drew an absent design on the ground with a stick. "'Cause that's the way the trail goes," he said patiently.

"A hell of a trail. The way it winds around, a blind buffalo must have made it."

"A buffalo would have more sense than to try to take a short-cut like you want to do across country where there ain't no water and the rocks are so sharp they'd cut his hoofs to ribbons."

Hitchcock flushed. "Are you insinuating—"

"Heh!" On the opposite side of the fire, Fillmore Parrish chuckled, his faded blue eyes sparkling in his thin, wrinkled face. "Dan ain't 'sinuatin' nothin', Max. He's just tellin' you point-blank that you ain't got the sense of a buffalo with the blind staggers!"

"Grandpa!" Anne Parrish scolded. The girl looked thoughtfully at Dan for a moment and his eyes fell before her steady gaze. He wasn't exactly an expert on women, but for his money Anne Parrish was the trimmest, purtiest young filly that had ever made a man's heart turn over at the lift of an eyelash. No wonder Hitchcock threw a purple fit every time she looked twice at another man.

"You hired Dan to guide us, Max," she said slowly. "You ought to trust him. I trust him."

Dan blushed. "Thank you kindly, ma'am."

Hitchcock snorted. "I still think—"

He broke off at the sound of nearing hoofbeats out in the night. Dan cocked his head to one side and listened. That might be Tex and Wolf Ear. He reckoned it was about time they showed up. He had been worrying a mite about them lately. Not that he figured any harm had come to them, Still, the folk back in Sagebrush City had been a shade riled up and you couldn't tell when some damned fool would take a notion to break in a new lariat by stretching a couple of necks.

"Who's there?" the wagon guard challenged.

The clatter of hoofs ceased and a calm, pleasant voice drawled, "Hold your fire, suh. They's just the two of us and we ain't fixin' to shed no blood."

Dan thoughtfully rubbed his chin. It was them, all right. And that sort of posed a problem.

Two men walked into the circle of firelight leading a pair of tired horses. One was an Indian, a huge, hulking figure with fierce-looking eyes and a face like something—in a nightmare. The other was a lean white man with friendly gray eyes set in a handsome face. Dan moved back so that Hitchcock's stocky figure shielded him from the eyes of the newcomers.

"Who are you?" Hitchcock demanded. "What do you want?"

"We're just a couple of weary travelers bound for Oregon, suh," the lean man answered with a smile. "I have the honor of being James Buchanan Randall—of the Texas Randalls. This is my friend Wolf Ear."

"I don't trust Indians."

"Wolf Ear is a civilized Indian," Randall said blandly. "He is the gentlest, most tender-hearted Cheyenne this side of the Mississippi. If he likes you, Wolf Ear will give you the shirt off his back."

"He ain't got no shirt on," Grandpa Parrish said suspiciously.

"That proves my point, Colonel," Randall said, bowing to the old man. "He's so big-hearted that I can't keep him in shirts. Ain't that right, Wolf Ear?"

Wolf Ear stared at Anne Parrish's long blonde hair and fingered his scalping knife longingly. "Huh!" he grunted.

"We'd be obliged for the hospitality of your camp for the night," Randall said, smiling at Hitchcock. "You see, we're out of grub on account of ridin' fast and light so that we can catch up with a friend of ours who hit the trail out of Sagebrush about a week ahead of us."

"Friend?" Hitchcock scowled. "Just what did this friend of yours look like?"

"Why, he was sort of—"

Dan stepped forward and cut in hastily, "I don't know as I'd believe that story, Hitchcock. Ain't nobody passed us in the last week. I sort of doubt that they even got a friend. More likely they're outlaws

and they're runnin' away from a posse."

Wolf Ear's eyes glittered for an instant, then he grunted, "Huh!"

A momentary puzzled look wrinkled Randall's forehead, then his eyes narrowed down and he said, "I beg your pardon, suh, but it sounded to me like you said—"

"I wouldn't trust 'em," Dan went on hurriedly. "They look like the kind of men who'd cut their own mother's throat for next to nothin'. If you feed 'em and let 'em spend the night with us, the next thing they'll want to do is trail along with us to Oregon. We got trouble enough as it is."

"I'm wagon captain," Hitchcock said stubbornly. "I'll thank you to keep out of my affairs."

Dan shrugged. "I'm warnin' you—"

"Who is this dried-up little runt?" Randall demanded of Hitchcock, jerking his head in Dan's direction. "Is he running the wagon train or are you?"

"I am!"

"Then, suh, may I suggest that we ignore him and discuss this matter like a couple of gentlemen? As I was saying, Wolf Ear and I have been ridin' hard tryin' to catch up with this friend of ours who we think headed for Oregon. You'd remember him if he had come this way, I'm sure. He's a big man about six feet four with black eyes and a beaver hat an' a long white beard—"

"Ain't nobody like that passed us," Grandpa Parrish said.

Randall sighed in disappointment and turned to Wolf Ear.

"I reckon we missed him. Maybe he changed his mind and headed south for California. What do you think, Wolf Ear? Shall we accept this gentleman's invitation and join his wagon train?"

"I didn't hear nobody give you an invite," Dan snapped.

"Shut up," Hitchcock demanded. "Of course you're invited, Randall. We'll be glad to have you."

"Well, Wolf Ear?" Randall prompted.

The Cheyenne's gaze moved to Dan's face and lingered there a moment. Gently Dan closed one eye. Wolf Ear grunted, "Huh!"

"He says," Randall explained with a smile, "the more the merrier. We will be delighted to join you. I trust the feeling is mutual."

DAN lay quietly in his blankets until the fires had died to embers and the rest of the camp had fallen asleep, then he arose and crept silently to where Tex Randall and Wolf Ear lay. He touched Tex on the shoulder and whispered, "You awake?"

"You're damned tootin'!" Tex answered hoarsely, "an' I'm waitin' for you to explain—"

"Shh! Follow me and we'll go where we can talk."

They moved like three bodyless wraiths across the enclosure, crouched in the deep shadows between two wagons until the guard had passed, then Dan led them downriver through the darkness. When they were well away from the camp he stopped, hunkered down near a sheltering boulder and filled his pipe.

"Now," Tex said angrily, "will you tell us what the hell the deal is? Why'd you act like you didn't know us? Why'd you tell Hitchcock we were a couple of outlaws?"

Dan applied a match to his pipe. "It's a long story."

"It had better be a good one. Wolf Ear and me are plenty sore over the way you ran out on us back there in Sagebrush City."

Dan grinned in the darkness. "Were they purty mad?"

"Mad enough to eat hornets. They were going to lynch us both when they found out you'd skipped with the money. I had to do some mighty fast talkin' to save our necks."

Dan nodded complacently. "I figgered you'd be able to talk 'em out of it. You were always a mighty good hand when it come to slingin' words around, Tex. If only you could think as fast as you can talk."

Dan broke off and smoked silently for a time, recalling the affair back at Sagebrush City. He had drifted into the trading post with Tex and Wolf Ear figuring on stocking up on grub and supplies before tackling the long stretch of unsettled country that lay beyond the frontier outpost on the trail to Oregon. Tex, who could raise a thirst if he were swimming in a fresh-water lake in a cloudburst, had suggested throwing one last spree, so the three of them had gone to the local saloon and absorbed a few drinks.

Somehow or other one thing had led to the next until they had found themselves sitting in at a poker game with half a dozen of the town's better-heeled citizens. It had been a pleasant, friendly game until a certain tall, solemn-faced gent with black eyes and very agile fingers had taken a hand, then somehow most of the cash around the table had started accumulating in front of him.

By nature, Dan Little was not a suspicious man. And the solemn-faced gent was smooth, very smooth. But Dan's eyes were sharp and he could put away an amazing amount of the potent reye that flowed freely around the table without its affecting his eyesight in the least. So when the solemn-faced gentleman performed a neat bit of sleight-of-hand while dealing, Dan mildly called it to the attention of the assembled company.

Bedlam was not long in breaking loose. The tall man was not only deft of hand but also fleet of foot. Before anyone could move, he had upended the table, shot out the lights and was making fast and frequent tracks for the wide open spaces. The losers in the game—and they were all losers by then—gave a concerted roar of rage and followed.

All except Dan Little.

It was dark in the saloon. He lay on the floor where his tipped-over chair had dumped him, philosophically reflecting that he should have shot the solemn-faced gent first and accused him of dealing from the wrong side of the deck second. He could hear the bartender cursing as he fumbled around for a lamp, while outside the sound of galloping hoofs grew fainter as the impromptu posse formed.

In some manner, Dan's hand touched a scattered pile of greenbacks that had spilled on the floor. It was too dark to count them; besides, he was not positive just how much money he had lost, so he did the thing any sensible man would have done. He scooped up all the loose bills he could find, stuffed them in his pocket and left the saloon before the bartender could strike a light.

Outside, he mounted his horse and sat for a moment debating what to do. Tex and Wolf Ear, impulsive souls that they were, had joined the pursuit of the fleet-footed stranger. That, Dan reflected, was

too bad. It was really a rather pointless chase. The stranger had gotten away with nothing that belonged to any of them and the only satisfaction they would get out of catching him was the non-profitable enjoyment of seeing him dance at the end of a rope.

Dan sighed. Every man to his own pleasures. Evidently the citizens of Sagebrush City got more enjoyment out of hanging people than they did out of money, else they would not have hurried off so quickly and left their money lying about on the saloon floor? That being the case, Dan saw no reason why he should hang around until the posse returned. In fact, it appeared to him that the sooner he left town the better.

And so he did.

He grinned at Tex. "Did they catch the slick-dealin' gent?"

"Hell, no!" Tex snorted in disgust. "We chased him till damned near midnight and never got within shootin' distance of him, so we turned around and came back to the saloon. Everybody was plenty sore. But that wasn't nothin' to what they were when they found out you'd skipped with the money."

"I'd probably a won it anyhow," Dan said laconically. "I was holdin' three kings when the deal broke up. What'd they do to you?"

"Well, they knew you were with me an' Wolf Ear an' naturally they figured we was in on it. First they were going to take us out and string us up, but I managed to talk 'em out of that by tellin' 'em maybe you'd started out with the posse an' had got lost. So they threw us in jail to wait an' see if you'd come back.

"Wolf Ear ate so much they figgered they were losin' money on him so they turned him loose after a couple of days. He waited for his chance an' caught the sheriff in a dark alley one night and bopped him on the head and borrowed his keys. Then we high-tailed it out of town."

Dan nodded. "I figgered you'd be able to take care of yourselves."

Tex looked at him curiously. "How'd you happen to tie up with the wagon train?"

Dan explained how he had come across the camp of the emigrants two days' ride out of Sagebrush City. "They was only

five wagons," he said, "all of 'em from the same part of the hills back in Missouri. They was lost. I offered to set 'em back on the right trail an' this fella Hitchcock hired me as guide. He means well, I reckon, but he's a contrary cuss. A couple of days later we caught up with a fella by the name of Jim Miller who was headed for Oregon with ten freight wagons, so we all joined up together."

"Freight wagons?" Tex said with a scowl. "What's he carryin'?"

"Farm implements," Dan answered, applying another match to the dead embers in his pipe. "Leastways, that's what he claims."

"A funny thing to be freighting all the way out to Oregon."

"That," Dan said softly, "is kind of the way I figgered."

He smoked thoughtfully for a time. "There's another funny thing about this Miller gent. He's got two bullwhackers for every wagon, but they ain't worth a hoot in hell at drivin' oxen. They're sure handy with a gun, though. And jumpy. The way they guard them wagons you'd think they was loaded with gold 'stead of farm implements."

"Seems to me you've strayed a long ways from the point," Tex interrupted. "What I want to know is why in the hell you acted like you didn't know us."

"I told you Hitchcock is a contrary cuss."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"If he'd knowed you was friends of mine, he wouldn't have let you come along. He don't like me."

"He hired you, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but I don't take nothin' off of him an' it galls him 'cause I know the country an' he don't. There's a gal in the train he likes to show off in front of, an' he's so jealous of her he spits green."

"I saw her. Kind of cute. Who's the old gent?"

"Her grandpop. An' he's the one that's got me worried. You see, he's the one that's got the eight thousand dollars. He talks too much an' Jim Miller has found out about it an' I think he's fixin' to knock the old man off."

Tex stared at him for a moment, then said slowly. "Would you mind ropin' that critter and draggin' it by again?"

"I said," Dan explained patiently, "that Grandpa Parrish had eight thousand dollars—"

"Where'd he get all that money?"

"Sold his farm back in Missouri."

"All right, I'm ridin' double with you that far."

"Miller wants that money. He wants it so bad he's willin' to murder the whole kit and kaboodle from Missouri. An' take it from me, he's just the sort of gent who could do that little job and then sit down an' eat a hearty breakfast."

Chapter II

BOTTLED BURN-OUT

"I'M BEGINNIN' to see a faint glimmer of light," Tex said. "You figure this Jim Miller is the curly wolf in a pack of lobos. He's got ten wagonloads of hardware that damned sure ain't garden hoes, and you figure he's got some kind of a shady deal afoot. You've also got a notion that he's goin' to massacre a flock of innocent little sheep so's he can steal the old man's money, and it worries you so terrible you can't sleep nights for tryin' to figure out some scheme to save the poor little lambs."

"That," Dan admitted, "sort of sums it up in a nutshell. Sometimes, Tex, you show almost human intelligence."

"I'd say," Tex went on, eyeing him narrowly, "that it was downright noble of you—"

"That'd be kind of you."

"—if I didn't know you so well. Just what do you figure to make out of it?"

Dan tapped the dottle out of his pipe on the heel of his boot. "Let's say I'm doin' it just for the good of my soul."

"All right. We'll say that—even though we know it's a damned lie." Tex was silent a moment. "Just where do Wolf Ear and me fit into this scheme of yours?"

"Well, I kind of figgered if you'd pretend you was outlaws—"

"We don't have to pretend. There's probably a couple of ropes the size of our necks waitin' for us back in Sagebrush City."

"—and sort of shine up to this Miller gent, you could get a line on what he calculates to do."

"I'd just as soon shine up to a nest of rattlesnakes, if it's all the same to you. What makes you think he's going to believe we're outlaws?"

"Well, he'll figure it out this way: either you're for him or agin him, ain't that right?"

"Well—"

"Bein' as I'm guide for the wagon train and bein' as I got such an honest face, he'll figure I'm agin him. Right?"

"I ain't so sure."

"So if you show him that you're agin me, there won't be nothin' left for him to believe except that you're for him. Ain't that logical?"

Tex spat on the ground. "I had a horse once that ate loco weed and from that day on the only way he'd run was in circles. He thought he was bein' logical, too, but he never got nowhere."

"Take my word for it, it'll work. What we'll do is frame up a fight 'tween you an' me. Then he'll come to the natural conclusion that we hate each other's guts."

"What'll we fight about?"

"I'll think of somethin'. Now, have you got all that straight in your head?"

Tex said he guessed he had. He turned to Wolf Ear, who had sat passively beside him all through the conversation. When it came to talking, the Cheyenne was a man of few words, but his understanding of English was adequate enough. Tex nodded him.

"You got that, Wolf Ear?"

The Cheyenne's only answer was a subdued snore.

Under Dan's guiding hand, the wagon train made good time during the following week, though Hitchcock constantly grumbled that sticking to the twisting river valley seemed like a lot of nonsense. Jim Miller sided in with the Missourians, saying that it appeared to him that if a guide really knew the country as Dan pretended to know it he ought to be able to show them a shorter trail than that along the river. Dan endured their grumblings without comment for a while, then one afternoon he said mildly, "Maybe you'd like to take over my job, Miller."

Jim Miller was a dark, ponderous man who towered over Dan by a full head. He made no attempt to conceal the antagonism in his eyes as he squinted down at Dan and

said slowly, "I reckon a poor guide is better than none."

"This your first time up the trail?"

"Yeah."

"Then keep your opinions to yourself. We're getting close to Blackfoot country now. I'm gettin' sick an' tired of you two greenhorns belly-achin' about the short-cuts an' if you don't quit runnin' off at the mouth I'm goin' to leave you flat and let you take your chances with the Injuns. I got a notion they'd sure like to have what you got in them wagons."

Miller's eyes narrowed. "Are you talkin' about my wagons or Hitchcock's?" he demanded.

"Both," Dan said shortly, and spurred his horse away.

After that there was no more talk about short-cuts, but Dan noticed that Miller kept a wary, suspicious eye on him. Of evenings, Miller's ten wagons were always grouped alongside one another, and, in addition to the two guards who did sentry duty over the camp as a whole, there was always a pair of watchful, hard-eyed men seeing to it that none of the Missourians got to poking curiously around the freight wagons.

Tex, as Dan had expected, had soon talked himself into favor with everyone in camp. Even Hitchcock seemed to like him, despite the fact that the smooth-talking Texan was making a definitely favorable impression on Anne Parrish. Miller was more reserved, but on several occasions Dan caught him eyeing Tex with a speculative gleam in his eye, as if measuring him and wondering. The stolid Wolf Ear tagged along with Tex like a silent, oversized shadow.

AFTER SUPPER one evening Dan was sitting in front of the fire thoughtfully staring into the flames when Anne appeared carrying a worn calico dress and a needle and thread. She smiled pleasantly and sat down beside him. He watched her as she tried to thread the needle in the flickering glow of the fire.

"Kind of poor light, ma'am," he said, getting up to toss more wood on the fire.

"Thank you, Dan. That's much better."

"Travelin' is kind of hard on clothes, ain't it?"

"Terribly hard. I just hope this dress

manages to last until we get to Oregon."

Grandpa Parrish limped up, a thin, gaunt figure in the firelight, and stood looking over her shoulder for a moment. "What you doin'?"

"Sewing, Grandpa."

"'Pears to me that dress is more patches than anything else."

She allowed that he was right.

"Doggone my tough old hide," he exclaimed, "iff'n I don't buy you a hundred dresses when we get to Oregon. Satin ones, too, by grab."

"One will be enough," Anne said quietly. "A white one with a long veil."

"What you want a veil for? You ain't got nothin' to hide."

"Brides always wear veils."

"You figger on catchin' yoreself a man?"

She flushed. "Quit teasing, Grandpa. You know I've already caught one."

Dan got up, ill at ease. All this talk about brides and wedding dresses made him feel peculiar inside, like he'd just swallowed a big chunk of ice that lay in his stomach and wouldn't melt. As he walked away from the fire, Grandpa Parrish shot him an odd look, then limped stiffly after him.

"Say, young feller, wait up a minute."

Dan waited in the shadows. "Yeah?"

Parrish squinted at him. "You feel all right?"

"Sure. I feel fine."

"You look kind of peaked. Thought maybe you had a touch of indigestion or somethin'." The old man looked carefully around, then leaned close and whispered, "I got somethin' in the wagon that'll fix you up fine. That is, if you need somethin' to perk you up."

"Come to think of it," Dan said, "I have been sort of off my feed lately."

Parrish led him to the back of the wagon and fumbled around in the darkness for a moment. "Give me a hand with this here keg," he whispered hoarsely. "It's kind of heavy."

There were four small wooden kegs in the back of the wagon. Dan lifted one up until the spigot driven into it projected over the wagon's tail gate. Parrish produced a pair of large tin cups from somewhere and handed one to Dan, chuckling.

"Best damned corn whiskey in the state of Missouri, even if I did make it myself. Anne raised hell when I insisted on bringin'

it along, but I told her damned if I was goin' to drink river water all the way to Oregon." He put his cup under the spigot and twisted it. "People get sick from drinkin' river water."

Dan allowed that that was so.

Parrish waved Dan to the spigot. "Help yoreself an' don't be stingy."

Dan did and he wasn't. As he stood with the cup in his hand, the rising fumes of alcohol made his eyes water. "Smells like good whiskey," he said politely.

"It takes the hair off where you got it an' puts it on where you ain't," Parrish said with modest pride. He studied Dan in the darkness. "Say, what do you think of Max Hitchcock?"

"Why, I reckon he's all right," Dan said cautiously. "Maybe a little bull-headed."

Parrish snorted. "He's half ox an' tother half mule!"

"He and Anne figure on marryin' each other?"

"Well, *she* figgers on it an' *he* figgers on it. But *I* ain't so sure." The old man's voice grew wistful. "Anne's all I got left in the world an' 'fore I kick off I want to make sure she's got a man that can take care of her." He was silent a moment, then said abruptly, "You married?"

"Not hardly."

"Ever think about gettin' married?"

"Sometimes. But I always sobered up the next mornin'."

"You want to know somethin'? I think you're a purty bright young feller who'd know a bargain when he seen one. Not countin' the fact that Anne is as purty as a picture and as sweet as a hive full of honey, she's purty well fixed financially."

"That so?" Dan said in some embarrassment.

"When I turn up my toes—an' that may be most any day now—she gits every penny I own. An' that ain't hay." He looked cautiously around, then beckoned Dan closer. "Ain't many people know it, but I'm carryin' eight thousand dollars in cold cash."

Not many people, thought Dan, but the whole damned wagon train.

"Ain't that kind of risky?"

"Heh!" Parrish chuckled. "I ain't as foolish as I look. I got that money hid where nobody'd find it. You want to know where it's hid?"

"Well—"

"Well, I damn sure ain't goin' to tell you!" Parrish lifted his cup. "Better drink up quick. These cups ain't worth a hoot in hell. The whiskey eats the bottoms out if you let it set too long."

The old man raised his cup and drained it before he lowered it from his lips. Dan followed suit. Parrish gave a sigh of satisfaction as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Shore hits the spot, don't it?"

Dan was starting to say it sure did when unaccountably his voice failed him. His ears burned like a pair of torches.

When he had finally got his voice back, he muttered, "Not bad."

"Kind of tastes of tar a mite," Parrish apologized.

"Is that what it was?"

"—but that don't hurt it none. First batch I put up ate right through the seams in the keg, so I had to line 'em with tar. Tastes kind of funny at first but you get used to it. The tar cuts the acid."

"Does it?" Dan gulped. He was beginning to feel dizzy. In his time, he had downed some pretty potent concoctions but never in his born days had he swallowed anything like this.

"I think," he mumbled, "that I'll turn in. Thanks for the snort."

"Anytime," Grandpa Parrish said with a generous wave of his hand. "Anytime at all."

Dan never knew how he found his way to his blankets, but somehow he did. Gratefully he lay down, staring up for a moment at a handful of stars that had suddenly gone crazy and were chasing one another around in circles—then the whole sky went black.

IT WAS several days before Dan got a chance to talk to Tex and Wolf Ear. The wagon train had left the rough country along the river behind by then, climbing out of the narrow valley where it swung off to the southwest to the flat, sage-covered plain above and following the dusty trail across dry country where the sun beat down without mercy and heat waves shimmered on the distant horizon. Dan was scouting several miles ahead of the train one day when he met Tex and Wolf Ear returning from a hunt with a pair of antelope they

had shot. They paused in a draw where they would be unobserved.

"How you comin' with Miller?" Dan asked.

Tex built a cigarette. "Slow. He's a mighty cautious gent. But I found out one thing. This ain't his first trip up the trail."

"How do you know?"

"Overheard 'im talkin' to one of his men. He was pointin' out Chimney Mountain when we passed it a couple of days ago an' sayin' that it marked the eastern boundary of Blackfoot country. No tenderfoot would know that."

Dan nodded thoughtfully. "I kind of figgered he was lyin' about not knowin' the trail."

"Why would he want to do that?" Tex demanded, eyeing Dan curiously. "It don't make sense that he'd tie up with emigrants and let you guide 'em if he knew the country."

"Supposin'," Dan said, "that his wagons are carryin' what we think they're carryin' an' he run into an army patrol. By himself, he might draw suspicion. But if it looked like he was part of an emigrant train, it ain't likely the soldiers would suspect anything, is it?"

"That's reasonable, I reckon."

"I'd sure like a peek into them wagons."

"It's risky as hell, but if you say so I'll chance it."

Dan shook his head. "I'll manage that end of it. The important thing for you to do is to get on the inside track with him an' find out when he plans to jump Hitchcock's bunch."

"When we goin' to stage this little battle of ours?"

"Soon," Dan said.

Tex started to rein away, then turned back, a speculative gleam in his eye. "I was talkin' to Anne last night."

Dan gave him a suspicious look. "Yeah?"

"You know what she told me? She told me she figures on marryin' Max Hitchcock when they git to Oregon."

"I reckon that's her affair."

"Kind of a shame, ain't it?"

"That's all accordin' to whose viewpoint you look at it from."

Tex took a final drag at his cigarette and tossed it away. "You ever think about gettin' married, Dan?"

"Who'd marry me?" Dan said stiffly.

"Reckon you got somethin' there. You are a kind of ugly little runt. Now if you was handsome, like me—"

Dan watched the lean Texan and the Cheyenne ride away, a scowl wrinkling his face. Why, that puffed-up, conceited bag of wind! What'd he mean—If you was handsome . . . ?

The camp had a quiet, peaceful air about it that evening as the members of the wagon train lolled around in the growing dusk waiting for the call to supper. Hitchcock, Grandpa Parrish and Jim Miller were squatting near a wagon listening to one of Tex Randall's long-winded stories when Dan came strolling up. Wolf Ear lay under the wagon engaging in his favorite pastime—sleep.

"We gave 'em hell, all right," Tex was saying. "'Course I was only a kid then but my pa has told me many a time how them Mexicans come marching up at San Jacinto as cocky as Jaybirds in a cornfield. They didn't know what kind of fighters us Texans were."

Dan hunkered down and started drawing designs on the ground with a stick. "I come from Kansas myself."

Tex looked up in irritation. "What's that got to do with it?"

"With what?"

"With the way Texans fight."

"Nothin' much," Dan said. "'Cept I always figgered I was lucky to be born in Kansas an' have Indian Territory between me an' Texas."

Tex's eyes narrowed. "It's every man to his own taste, but if you're insinuat' that Texas—"

"Texas," Dan said absently, "ought to be given back to the Mexicans."

Tex rose slowly to his feet, his gray eyes going smoky. "Suh, it sounded to me like you said Texas ought to be given back to the Mexicans. If you did make such a remark, I'll give you exactly five seconds to apologize."

Dan stood up. "I did make that remark. But I reckon I had ought to apologize. Giving Texas back to the Mexicans would be a dirty trick—on Mexico."

Tex gave a roar of rage. In a blur of speed his right hand dropped to his whip and his gun whipped up. Dan heard a terrific explosion, then his hat went spin-

ning away—fast and far. He blanched.

"Tex—!"

"You double-dyed, insultin' son!" Tex exclaimed, launching himself toward him. "Dogged if I don't tear off your ears and stuff 'em down your throat!"

Dan took a couple of steps backward, wishing fleetingly that he had chosen some less explosive way of starting what he had intended to be a nice friendly fight. Then Tex was on him and was lifting the heavy pistol and aiming a blow with which, from the look in his eye, he intended to split Dan's skull from the waist up.

Chapter III

DEAD RIGHT!

DAN SEIZED the gun-arm just as it was about to descend. Throwing all his weight against it, he twisted hard. Tex gave a grunt of pain and dropped the gun. A vicious short left caught Dan on the ear. He reeled back. Tex charged in like a loco steer. Dan clipped him a 'good one on the chin, missed a short left, then Tex closed with him. Both men lost their balance and tumbled to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs.

"Yippee!" Grandpa Parrish chortled. "Give it to him, Dan. Ram yore fist down his throat an' turn him wrongside out!"

"Knee him, Tex!" Miller shouted, his reserve vanishing. "Rub his face in the dirt!"

From the way elbows and knees were flying at him, Dan got the confused impression that Tex had suddenly sprouted six of each. He managed to drive him off for a moment with a stiff right to the face, then Tex was at him again. As they grappled, Dan whispered in his ear.

"Take it easy, you damn fool! This is the frame-up!"

Tex's eyes were glazed. "What frame-up?" he grunted.

Dan struggled to his feet. Tex lumbered up, wiped a trickle of blood off his cheek and started for him. Suddenly a bulky figure appeared out of nowhere and Dan felt a huge hand seize him by the neck. Rolling his eyes to one side, he saw Wolf Ear holding Tex in one hand and himself in the other.

"You crazy?" the Cheyenne demanded.

"Let me go!" Tex raged. "I'll murder that shriveled-up little runt!"

"Let us fight it out!" Dan choked. "I'll break every bone in his body!"

Wolf Ear stared first at one man, then at the other, his black eyes puzzled. At last he gave a grunt of disgust, muttered, "No fight anymore," and brought their heads together with a solid smack.

When Dan regained consciousness, it was dark and he was lying on his back with his head in Anne Parrish's lap. Dimly he heard her say, "Bring some more water, Max. He's coming around."

"Water, hell!" Grandpa Parrish snorted. "That'll make him sick. Here, give him a snort of this."

Dan felt his head being lifted and a tin cup placed to his lips. The potent fumes of corn whiskey choked him. Feebly he tried to wave the cup away but suddenly his mouth was full of liquid fire. He gulped twice.

"Feel better?" Anne asked with concern.

"I—I—" he mumbled, then passed out cold again.

He didn't feel so good when he woke up the next morning but breakfast and a couple of cups of scalding coffee put enough life in him so that he reckoned he could make it through the day. As he was saddling his horse, Max Hitchcock came up to him, anger in his face.

"That was a hell of a trick you pulled last night," the Missourian grumbled, "startin' a fight with Tex."

Dan blinked. "I didn't start no fight. I just made an innocent remark and he pulled a gun on me."

Hitchcock scowled, and Dan saw that there was worry in his eyes. "He did grab that gun awful fast, didn't he? I wonder—"

"You wonder what?" Dan prompted.

"Nothing," Hitchcock said shortly. "C'mon, we're going over and talk to Tex."

Dan gave the Missourian a shrewd side-long glance as they walked over to where Tex, Wolf Ear and Miller were saddling their horses. Hitchcock had the look of a man with a good deal on his mind, and for the first time Dan sensed that under his bull-headedness the wagon captain had a streak of hard strength. Miller and Tex turned and regarded Dan with cold, hostile eyes.

"I want it understood that there's to be

no more fighting," Hitchcock said sternly.

Tex gave Dan a narrow look, then dropped his gaze to the ground. "I ain't takin' the kind of talk he gave me last night from nobody."

"And I'm sidin' in with Tex," Miller said coldly.

So, Dan thought, Miller as well as Hitchcock had been impressed with the speed with which Tex had pulled his gun. A nice touch, that. But he hadn't exactly appreciated the way Tex's bullet had damned near parted his hair.

"There'll be no more of that kind of talk," Hitchcock said bluntly. He looked at Dan. "You hear me?"

"I hear you," Dan grunted.

"And you, Tex?"

"All right. But after we git to Oregon—"

"That's your affair. Yours and Dan's." He turned on his heel. "Let's get moving."

All that day the wagon train moved slowly across the flat, sage-covered plain. To the north, a jagged blue line of peaks broke the horizon, and every now and then Dan's eyes turned toward them with a frowning, worried look. This was Blackfoot country, and for the next week the wagon train would be in imminent danger from attack by roving war-parties of the fierce tribe. If Miller and his twenty men could be depended upon, the train might be able to muster enough fighting strength to take care of itself. Dan wondered how far Miller could be trusted, and came to the grim conclusion—about as far as a man could throw an ox by the tail.

Several times during the day he attempted to get Tex off alone for a talk but no safe opportunity presented itself. But that evening, after camp had been made in a grove of cottonwoods that flanked a shallow creek, he got a brief word with him as they were staking their horses out for the night.

It's about to break, Tex muttered in a low voice.

Dan looped his horse's tie-rope about the picket pin. "Did I have it figgered right?"

"Pretty close."

"Meet me at the bend of the creek above camp when the moon comes up."

Because of the danger that sharp Black-foot eyes might spot them, supper fires were kept small and were extinguished before night fell. The emigrants huddled together

in a single group while on the other side of camp Miller and his men kept to themselves, talking quietly in the darkness. Dan got up. "Think I'll take a look at my horse 'fore I turn in."

It lacked an hour until moonrise. An unexplainable feeling of apprehension filled him as he made his way across the dark camp toward the circled wagons. Had Tex meant that he'd found out what Miller was carrying in the freight wagons and what he intended doing with his cargo? Or was Miller about to murder the Missourians and make off with the old man's money?

He was passing between two wagons when he became aware of a stealthy noise nearby. He froze. Dimly he made out the figure of a man dropping to the ground from the tail-gate of one of the wagons, then the figure was gone into the darkness. Dan frowned. The wagon was Parrish's, but the figure had been neither that of Anne nor of the old man.

Quietly he moved around to the rear of the wagon and climbed inside. The darkness was complete but he could tell by feel that the wagon's contents had been strewn every which way—undoubtedly by the man who had disappeared at his approach. Why? The answer was obvious enough. The man had been searching for money. Parrish's money.

Dan vaulted lightly to the ground and stood unmoving for a time, lost in thought. Again the feeling came to him that something was about to break. Miller would like to get the money the easy way, if possible, but it was not likely his search had discovered it. Parrish, despite his talkativeness, had a certain shrewdness that would have made him hide the money where no casual search would uncover it.

Dan frowned. He would like to do a bit of searching himself—in Miller's wagons. But that might prove difficult. The wagons were guarded. Of course he might slip up in the darkness and put one of the guards to sleep with the barrel of his pistol. But then Miller would immediately know that his game was discovered and would go into action before Dan could devise a scheme to defeat him.

The potent fumes of corn whiskey struck Dan's nostrils and he gave an involuntary shudder. Doggone, even the smell of Grandpa Parrish's panther poison was almost

enough to knock a man out! He sniffed thoughtfully for a moment, then suddenly he climbed back into the wagon and started fumbling around among the scattered belongings. Ought to be a canteen here someplace.

A FEW minutes later he was sauntering across the camp toward Miller's wagons. Walking boldly between two of them, he stopped in the deep shadows and uncorked the canteen, ignoring the bulky figure of the guard who immediately approached him.

"Hey," the man muttered, "what do you think you're doin'?"

"Nothin'," Dan answered innocently.

"What's that you got in yore hand?"

"A canteen."

"What's in it?"

Dan raised the canteen to his lips and held it there, making steady gurgling sounds but being careful that none of the potent liquid passed his lips. Lowering it, he whispered to the guard, "Look, a man's got a right to take a drink when he wants one, ain't he?"

"Ain't nobody supposed to be foolin' around these wagons. Miller's orders."

"I ain't goin' to eat 'em. All I want is a place where I can take my drink in peace."

"What's the matter with your own side of camp?"

"Hitchcock hates whiskey. Says if he ever seen me takin' a drink he'd fire me. Now I ask you, ain't a man got a right to take a drink when he wants one? Do you let Miller tell you when you can an' can't drink?"

"'Course not."

"Well—?"

"Well—" The guard looked hastily around, then moved closer. "Smells potent. Where'd you get it?"

"Bought it off a fella from Missouri. It's guaranteed to knock yore head off."

"That so?" the guard said eagerly.

"I'd give you a taste, only—"

"Yeah?"

"Only I wouldn't want to be responsible for what it did to you. It's got a hell of a kick."

The guard growled a curse, reached out suddenly and jerked the canteen out of Dan's hand. Dan watched him put it to his

lips and hold it there for long seconds. "There!" the man said at last. "Reckon that'll show you."

His voice faded away into a whisper. "What'd you say?" Dan asked.

The guard seemed to have lost his voice. Dan waited, counting slowly under his breath. The way he calculated, it ought to take effect by the time he counted to sixty. Seventy-five at the most.

"... forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty. . . ."

At fifty-one, the guard's knees buckled. Dan caught him so that his head wouldn't make a racket striking the wagon wheel as he fell, gently lowered him to the ground, then, shaking his head in admiration for Grandpa Parrish's iron constitution, turned and climbed into the wagon.

When the moon rose, flooding the plain with its orange, uncertain light, Dan was waiting for Tex at the bend of the creek, impatient and on edge now that he knew what the freight wagons contained. A few minutes later Tex appeared, a vague shadow in the faint light with the larger shadow of Wolf Ear padding soundlessly behind him.

"That you, Dan?" Tex called softly.

Dan's head still ached from the combined effects of Parrish's corn whiskey and its forcible collision with Tex's skull the night before. "What's left of me," he muttered.

Tex chuckled. "That was a good scrap we had last night."

"Too good to suit me. What was the idea pullin' a gun on me? If I hadn't of ducked, you'd a plugged me right between the eyes."

"Shucks, do you think I'd a missed if I'd really been shootin' at you?"

Wolf Ear interrupted with an unintelligible grunt. "He's apologizin' for battin' our heads together," Tex explained. "He says he didn't know it was a friendly fight."

"When brains was passed out," Dan snapped, "Wolf Ear was off somewhere under a tree takin' a nap." He said impatiently, "What'd you find out?"

Tex's voice grew sober. "Miller's goin' to pull his wagons out of the train tomorrow. He's headin' north into Blackfoot country."

"He'll get his scalp lifted."

"That's what I told him but he just laughed and said to let him worry about

that. He says he's made arrangements to meet Chief Crazy Cow and some of his bucks an' trade with 'em."

"Did he tell you what he had to trade?"

Tex shook his head. "No. All he said was that he wasn't afraid of Crazy Cow because he'd had dealings with him before. Seems as if he comes up the trail every year and trades a few wagonloads of trinkets to the Blackfeet for beaver pelts. Does quite a thrivin' business, to hear him tell it."

"His trinkets," Dan said grimly, "are rifles. I climbed in one of the wagons and saw 'em."

Tex muttered, "I didn't exactly figure they were beads."

"How far does he trust you?"

"I dunno. He's a pretty cagy gent. I think he's convinced that I ain't exactly a Sunday School superintendent but he ain't seen fit to unburden his soul to me. All he said was that he was cuttin' loose from the wagon train tomorrow an' headin' north to trade with the Blackfeet and he wants me to come along."

"He kind of hinted that he didn't trust his crew of lobos too much and he'd kind of like to have me keep an eye on 'em. For that matter, he don't seem to trust nobody. He said that he's goin' to hide the wagons, take part of his crew an' collect the beaver pelts from Chief Crazy Cow before he turns the stuff over to the Injuns."

Dan nodded thoughtfully. "You goin' to be with him or the wagons?"

"Reckon I'll stay with the wagons. He says he wants to take Wolf Ear along to palaver with the Injuns." Tex spat angrily on the ground. "How far are we supposed to string along with him? I can't say I cotton to the idea of helpin' him turn over ten wagonloads of rifles to them scalp-liftin' Blackfeet."

Dan frowned. Miller's pulling out of the wagon train made it appear that he had given up the idea of trying to get the money hidden in Parrish's wagon, but somehow Dan couldn't believe it.

"He didn't say nothin' about jumpin' Hitchcock's bunch?"

"Not a cheep."

"Funny. Damned funny."

"Look here," Tex snapped, "I think you been barkin' up the wrong tree all along. It appears to me that the really tough nut we got to crack is to figger out some way

to keep the Injuns from gettin' those rifles. You don't seem to be worryin' about that at all. Now I think—"

"Leave the thinkin' up to me," Dan said. "I've had more practice at it."

Tex snorted. "All right, professor, oil up that so-called brain of yours an' tell me just how we're goin' to take care of this little problem."

"Why," Dan said with a grin, "that's easy. Now listen close—"

Tex listened. At first he listened attentively, then, as Dan elaborated on the plan he had in mind, he gave a snort of sheer disgust.

"It won't work. It won't work at all!"

"Sure it will," Dan said patiently. "You just do like I told you."

Tex shook his head, grumbling, "I've knowed you a long time, Dan, an' I've seen some mighty peculiar notions come out of that knot on your spine you call a brain—"

"They worked, didn't they?"

"—but of all the cockeyed, loco, bird-brained schemes I ever heard of, this'n takes the cake!"

"It'll work," Dan said stubbornly.

"Look, why don't the three of us go back to camp an' just pitch into Miller an' his gang without no preliminaries? That'd make more sense than this scheme you cooked up."

Dan patiently shook his head. "Gettin' yourself killed never did make sense to me. You try it my way first. If that don't work, then you can go out an' git yourself killed any way you want."

"Somehow," Tex said in a weary voice, "you always seem to get your way. All right, I'll try it. But I still think you're plumb loco."

"Other people have thought that too," Dan said mildly. "So far, they've all been wrong, but who knows—maybe you'll be the first one to be right."

Chapter IV

BIG LITTLE GUN-BUSTER!

EXCEPT for the sentries, the camp was asleep when Dan, Tex and Wolf Ear returned to the wagon train. They waited in the shadows until the guard had passed, then they slipped silently into the enclosure. "Wait here," Dan whispered.

"I'll have to go and wake up Parrish."

He had no difficulty finding the Parrish wagon. Anne, he knew, would be sleeping inside, but Parrish himself preferred to spread his blankets on the ground under the wagon bed. Moving cautiously in the darkness, he found the dim figure of the old man and touched him lightly on the shoulder. Parrish stirred, grumbling.

"What in tarnation—?"

"Quiet—it's me, Dan."

The old man sat up. "What's got into you? It ain't near daylight yet."

"I need your help."

"Are the Injuns comin'?"

"Worse than that. Now listen close—"

Briefly Dan told him of finding the guns in Miller's wagons and of Miller's plan to desert the wagon train the next day.

"The lowdown snake!" Parrish muttered. "I never did like him from the first minute I set eyes on him. Well, it'll be good riddance. I hope the Injuns lift his hair."

"That's just it," Dan said grimly. "We won't be rid of him. As soon as he turns the guns over to the Blackfeet, I figger he'll be comin' back to jump the wagon train."

"What for?"

"He wants that eight thousand dollars you're carryin'."

"Dad-blast my hide, he'll play hell gettin' it! I got it hid away so good he'll never find it."

"He'll find it all right," Dan cut in, "even if he has to tear your wagon into little pieces to do it. And with all of us dead there won't be a soul to stop him. He's got twenty gun-totin' men workin' for him an' if they jump us we won't stand a ghost of a show."

For once, Parrish was shocked into silence. At last he said, "What are we goin' to do?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Reckon I'll have to."

"Good. First thing I want is five gallons of your corn whiskey."

Parrish looked at him suspiciously. "You goin' on a spree?"

"Never mind. Just give me the whiskey."

"What are you goin' to do with it?"

"Give it to Tex."

"He goin' on a spree?"

"Do I get the whiskey or not?" Dan said impatiently.

Parrish gave a baffled shrug. "Sure, you can have it. But it sounds to me like you've gone plumb loco."

"That," Dan said with a grin, "is just what Tex thinks."

Max Hitchcock scowled as he watched the ten freight wagons lumber their slow way northward across the plain in the early morning light. Coming up beside him, Dan said, "Kind of left us in the lurch, didn't he?"

"He had a perfect right to pull out if he wanted to," the Missourian snapped.

"Well, it's good riddance. We'd better be hittin' the trail. We ain't got much time."

Hitchcock turned and looked at him, stubbornness coming to his eyes. "What's the hurry? We've got all the time in the world."

"No, we ain't," Dan said doggedly. "This country is swarmin' with Blackfeet. If they catch sight of us, we're done for. We won't be safe until we get to Fort Buford."

"That's two days from here."

"A day an' a night," Dan corrected. "We're goin' to lay the whip into them oxen an' keep movin' till we get to the fort. We can make it by tomorrow mornin'."

"If there's so much danger from Indians," Hitchcock said suspiciously, "how come you let Miller head north without warning him?"

The Missourian, Dan mused, had a faculty for asking the damndest questions. "I figured he was old enough to take care of himself."

"So am I," Hitchcock snapped. "We'll camp the same as usual tonight."

All that day the wagon train moved steadily westward. When evening came Hitchcock gave orders for camp to be made in the doubtful shelter of a shallow wash flanked by a scattering of trees.

"We'd better move on after supper," Dan said grimly.

"The oxen are tired," Hitchcock answered in a tone of finality. "We stay here."

Dan shrugged and filled his pipe with an air of indifference, but worry ate at his mind. Grandpa Parrish muttered, "Stub-

born cuss, ain't he? Did you tell him what was up?"

"What good would it do? He wouldn't believe me."

"Reckon you're right at that." Parrish spat thoughtfully on the ground. "When are Tex an' Wolf Ear goin' to catch up with us?"

"As soon as they finish what I told 'em to do."

"I'm powerful curious what that was."

Dan puffed placidly on his pipe and did not answer.

"The thing that makes me curious," Parrish persisted, "is what in hell Tex is goin' to do with five gallons of my whiskey. That's enough to keep him drunk for a month."

"He ain't goin' to drink it."

Parrish blinked. "What else kin you do with whiskey?"

Dan smiled. "Didn't you tell me that your whiskey ate through the seams of the first keg you put it in?"

"Shore did—till I lined it with tar."

"And it ate the bottoms out of the tin cups?"

"In next to no time at all. 'Course, that don't mean it ain't good drinkin' whiskey." He scowled at Dan. "I still don't see what that's got to do with keepin' them Injuns from gettin' their paws on them new rifles."

"You will," Dan said patiently. "You will."

Despite the worry riding him, Dan had no difficulty going to sleep that night for he had long since formed the habit of leaving his worries outside his blankets. But he slept light.

And he was instantly awake when, just as the first gray light of dawn was breaking, he heard the sound of horses approaching the camp. Getting to his feet, he saw Jim Miller and half a dozen of his men riding up. Wolf Ear was with them. Quickly Dan buckled his Colt about his waist, crossed to the Parrish wagon and called softly to the old man. "Rise an' shine. We got company."

Parrish threw back his blankets with one hand, picked up his rifle with the other and gave the riders a swift glance. "I'm ready," he muttered.

Dan watched Miller and his men dismount and file into the camp enclosure. Their faces gave no sign of what was in

their minds, but a quiet, prodding voice inside him warned him to be ready for anything.

Hitchcock stared puzzledly at Miller. "What happened? Where's your wagons?"

"The Injuns jumped us," Miller said grimly. "Took everything we had. We were lucky to get away with our scalps."

"Where are the rest of your men?"

"Dead, I reckon. We tried to make a run for it but they got most of us."

"How terrible!" Anne exclaimed, sympathy flooding her eyes.

The Missourians had gathered around Miller. None of them were armed except for the two men who had been on sentry duty, and those two, Dan saw with some concern, were completely off guard, standing with their rifle butts resting on the ground. His eyes went to Wolf Ear. The Cheyenne stood directly behind Jim Miller, his huge body motionless, his face impassive. As Dan stared, Wolf Ear gently closed one eye.

Hitchcock turned to his fellow Missourians and said, "You women folks start breakfast. We'd better eat and hit the trail in a hurry."

It happened then. Dan saw Miller's head move slightly in a signal to his men. He saw the men start to lift their rifles. Then the action became too swift to follow.

Wolf Ear seized Miller and another man by their necks, lifted them off the ground and batted their heads together with a resounding smack. A lope, hurried rifle shot from the Miller crowd went screaming over Max Hitchcock's head, then Grandpa Parrish's gun roared and the man who had fired the shot went down with a bullet in his chest.

Dan's Colt whipped up. He thumbed the hammer four times, and the explosions followed one another swiftly. Two more men went down. A man turned on Wolf Ear, but before his rifle could be brought to bear, the Cheyenne's knife flashed up and then down, and the man crumpled without a sound.

Miller stumbled to his feet, took one surprised look at the shambles about him, then broke and ran for his horse. Dan fired the remaining cartridge in his gun at the fleeing figure but the shot went high. He cursed.

"Leave him be!" Grandpa Parrish shouted. "He's mine—I'll teach the lowdown skunk to mess with me!"

The old man's rifle barked. Miller's hat went spinning away. He stumbled, and for a moment Dan thought he had been hit. Then he regained his feet, vaulted into the saddle and put spurs to his horse. In a matter of seconds he was out of range, his horse scuttling like a frightened jackrabbit over the plain.

"Doggone the luck!" Parrish exclaimed. "I'd a got him iff'n he hadn't tripped!"

A STUNNED silence held the emigrants. Hitchcock stared at Dan, who was laconically reloading his Colt. "You knew this was going to happen?"

"Kind of figured it would."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't reckon you'd believe me. You seemed to doubt everything else I said."

"Then Miller was lying about being attacked by Blackfeet?"

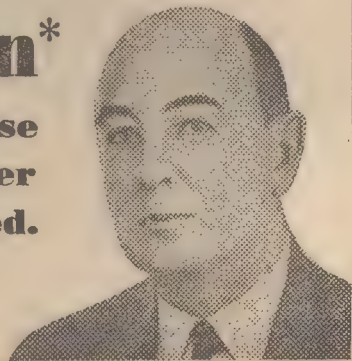
"Course he was. The reason he pulled out of the wagon train was because he had a load of guns for the Injuns. An' my guess

Timothy P. Sexton*

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* of 707 People's State Bank, Indianapolis, Ind.

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is that he's ridin' hell-for-leather back to Chief Crazy Cow now to get him an' his Blackfeet to finish the job he started."

"If that's the case," Hitchcock said thoughtfully, "we'd better not waste any time hitting the trail."

"That," Dan said grimly, "is the first intelligent remark I've heard you make."

All thought of breakfast was forgotten. Urged on by the wagon captain, the Missourians yoked up the oxen in record time and did not spare the whip as the five wagons left the camping place and lumbered westward. When the train had gotten under way, Dan rode up alongside Wolf Ear. He had expected that Tex would rejoin the emigrants long before now and his prolonged absence worried him.

"Where's Tex?"

Wolf Ear shrugged. "With wagons."

"Ain't Miller turned the guns over to the Injuns yet?"

The Cheyenne shook his head, then went on to explain what had happened the preceding day. Miller had taken the freight wagons deep into the foothills to the north, finally going into camp in mid-afternoon in a well hidden valley.

He had left Tex and most of his men there, ordered them not to move until he returned, then, taking Wolf Ear and half a dozen of his most trusted gunmen, he had ridden eastward out of the valley, as if intending to make contact with Chief Crazy Cow.

Shortly after dark, however, he had doubled back on his trail and ridden hard in a southwesterly direction to catch up with the wagon train, promising Wolf Ear that if he helped massacre the emigrants he would be rewarded by being permitted to take all the scalps he wanted.

Dan nodded. "Reckon he figgered that'd make it look like Injuns did the job." He frowned, his uneasy thoughts turning to Tex. "I hope Tex has got sense enough to make tracks while there's still time."

"Blackfeet come soon," Wolf Ear said warningly.

"I know." He was silent a moment. "I want you to take the fastest horse you can find and ride like hell to Fort Buford. Tell the soldiers there's big trouble and bring them back here plenty fast. You got that?"

The Cheyenne's eyes glittered. "Wolf Ear no go. Stay and fight."

"You do what I tell you. And don't pick no daisies along the way."

Reluctantly the Indian obeyed, and in a few minutes was galloping westward. The morning passed slowly. Dan kept twisting around in the saddle, eyes squinted up as he studied the back-trail, but as the hours passed the gray horizon line remained empty. Then shortly after noon he saw a moving wisp of dust lifting into the pale sky. Reining up, he stared intently at it.

"Injuns?" Grandpa Parrish said.

"Maybe. But there's just one of 'em. An' he's ridin' like the devil himself was on his tail."

Slowly the cloud of dust materialized into the figure of a lone rider. Minute by minute it grew until Dan saw that it was a white man. He gave a grunt of relief. "It's Tex."

The lean Texan's clothes were powdered with dust and his jaded horse was glistening with sweat. Seeing Dan, Tex lifted his hand in greeting.

"Howdy, stranger. Mind if I trail along with you?"

"About time you showed up. Everything all right?"

Tex shrugged. "It is, and it ain't." He took a curious glance at the wagons ahead. "From what I saw back the trail a ways, you must have had quite a scrap with Miller. Any casualties?"

"Only on one side—an' that wasn't ours. Miller got away."

"Yeah, I seen him. He come ridin' into camp with a couple of hundred Blackfeet just after I pulled out. Wish I'd been close enough to see the look on his face when he found all his men passed out cold."

"The whiskey did the trick?"

"Worked just like you said it would—'cept on one fellow. He was a teetotaler." Tex sighed. "Too bad. He pulled a gun on me, an' now he's teetotally dead."

"How about the rifles?"

"Why, I—"

"Hey," Parrish interrupted, "looker yonder!"

Dan whirled around. Far in the distance to the east a swarm of black figures was galloping toward them, the hoofs of many horses raising a broad cloud of dust. Reining his horse about, he galloped alongside the wagons. "Lay the whip into your oxen—we got to make a run for it!"

Hitchcock rode back and stared at the

nearing Indians. His face was drained of color but it held a certain dogged stubbornness. "Wouldn't it be better if we stopped and made a stand?"

"Wouldn't last five minutes," Dan snapped. "We got to keep movin' an' hope we can hold 'em off till the soldiers get here."

Hitchcock gave him a long look, hesitated, then said with unaccustomed meekness, "Whatever you say."

The oxen were not built for speed, but urged on by shouts, curses and cracking whips the stolid beasts broke into a clumsy run. Every man that could be spared mounted the extra horses and dropped back to the rear of the wagons. The Indians gained with every minute until soon their savage yells could be heard as they closed in.

Dan calculated that there must be two or three hundred of them, at least. He had to search for a minute before he found Miller, then he saw him with a dozen of his men—who had evidently recovered somewhat from the effects of the whiskey—riding in the fore of the attacking savages. Unlimbering his rifle, he waited until the Blackfeet were only a couple of hundred yards away, then he snapped, "Let 'em have it!"

A pitifully inadequate volley crackled into the Indian ranks. A pair of horses went down and a shouting brave suddenly toppled backward to the ground. That only served to anger the savages. Dan saw them sweeping forward, their rifles raised.

He was staring straight at a tall, raw-boned warrior who was lifting his gun to fire when an odd thing happened. With a roar, the gun disintegrated in the savage's face, and the next instant a riderless horse was galloping over the plain. At intervals all along the line the same thing happened. Blackfeet lifted their guns, squeezed the triggers—and were blasted into oblivion as the weapons exploded in their faces.

Tex stared in awe. "Doggone! It worked!"

"'Course it worked," Dan muttered as he shot another warrior off his horse. "I told you it would, didn't I?"

The Indians were falling behind as they milled about in confusion. Cries of anger split the air. Dan got a glimpse of Miller and his men, their faces white with sudden

fear, as the Blackfeet turned on them. Tomahawks and knives flashed in the sunlight. Then the white men vanished in a welter of bronze bodies.

"What in tarnation?" Parrish exclaimed. "Them Injuns are killin' Miller an' his whole passel of snakes! Now what'd they want to do that for?"

Chapter V

LIKKERED UP TO HELL AND GONE!

"**E**VEN an Injun don't like to be skinned in a trade," Dan said with a thin smile. "Reckon he tried to palm off some bad merchandise on 'em."

"Lookee—they're throwin' away their guns!"

"A gun ain't no good if it won't shoot."

Parrish scowled. He turned and looked at Tex. "What'd you do to them guns?"

"Nothin' much," Tex drawled modestly. "Just poured a mite of your corn whisky down the barrels."

"Well, burn my hide an' call me a two-legged steer!"

"Dan said he figgered the stuff would eat out the breech mechanism. 'Course I told him he was crazy, but I reckon he wasn't near as loco as I thought."

While the Indians had been occupied with the bloody business of taking revenge on Miller and his men, the lumbering wagons had drawn some distance ahead. But the respite was brief. Now the savages were closing the gap again, unlimbering their bows and sending a steady stream of arrows into the emigrants. Dan heard a woman scream in pain. Doggedly the inadequate rear guard kept up a volley of rifle fire, but the Blackfeet kept circling closer and soon would overwhelm the small force of whites by sheer weight of numbers alone.

"We're done for!" Parrish shouted, reining over toward Dan.

"Not yet, we ain't," Dan answered. "Close up on the wagons. If we have to, we'll stop an' try to make a stand."

"Ain't no use, youngster, but I'll do whatever you say. I just want to ask you one last favor. If you pull through this an' I don't, I want you to promise me you'll take care of Anne."

"Sure," Dan said absently as he re-

loaded his rifle. The old man went on. "The money is all hers. Listen close an' I'll tell you where it's hid."

"Later. Git back to the wagon!"

"It's hid—"

The old man broke off so sharply that Dan whirled and stared at him. He saw with a feeling of horror that an arrow had struck Parrish in the throat, going diagonally through the old man's neck and leaving a bleeding wound. Dan caught him as he fell forward on his horse's neck.

"Did they get him?" Tex shouted.

"He's bad hit," Dan answered. "Give me a hand, we'll put him in the wagon."

Between the two of them they managed to support him and lead his horse to the rear of the wagon. Gently they put him inside. Anne stared at them, white-faced. "Is he—dead?"

As if in answer, Parrish stirred. Dan, who had climbed into the wagon, stared down at him. The old man was alive enough. He kept opening and closing his mouth in an obvious effort to talk, but not a sound came out. Dan knelt and examined the wound.

"It ain't bleeding much. Guess the arrow didn't cut no vein."

"But, Dan, he can't talk!"

"Cut a vocal cord, I reckon. Seen that happen once before. He'll be able to talk as good as ever in a week or two." He frowned and added thoughtfully, "If we're lucky enough to get out of this."

The Indians were closing in. Dan had tied the reins of his horse to the rear of the wagon and the animal was trotting along behind. Leaving Parrish in Anne's care, he started to clamber over the tailgate. Suddenly he stopped and stared down at the four kegs of whiskey underfoot. He sniffed. Then he looked out at the shouting hordes of Blackfeet.

Injuns sure had a powerful thirst for whiskey. He wondered. . . .

Suddenly he stooped and picked up one of the barrels. Anne cried, "Dan, what are you doing?"

"Tossin' out some coyote poison."

"Look, Grandpa is trying to say something!"

Parrish had raised up and was shaking an angry fist at Dan while his mouth worked wordlessly. Dan shot him a brief glance, then shook his head in regret. "I

know it's a shame to waste yore good whiskey, but it's our only chance."

He heaved the barrel out of the wagon. He watched it strike the ground, bounce, roll and then come to a stop. A Blackfoot's horse shied away from it. The Indian, recognizing the familiar shape of the barrel, gave a whoop of pleasure and whirled his pony around.

Dan held his breath. Quickly the savage slid off the pony and attacked the barrel with a tomahawk. Then he fell to his knees and placed his mouth to the hole he had made in the barrel's end. He lay there for only a moment, then suddenly he leaped to his feet, cavorted for a few steps in a crazy circle and then collapsed on the ground.

Dan grinned. "Best damned corn in Missouri!"

It did not take long for a crowd of savages to gather around the barrel, and soon the entire pursuing war party was left behind. In the distance Dan could see them fighting over the whiskey. Every now and then a brave who had been successful in getting a few swallows of the potent liquid would stagger away, give a few whoops and then fall flat on his face.

The wagons lurched clumsily on. Dan kept his eyes on the savages behind, and after a while he muttered, "Here they come again."

He waited until they had almost caught up with the wagons before he picked up the second barrel. From the feel of it, it was a full one. "Here's mud in yore eye, you red devils!" he said as he tossed the keg out of the wagon.

Again the oncoming Indians forgot their lust for battle in their thirst for more exciting pleasures. Anne exclaimed, "Who would have thought they would be so crazy for whiskey? It's disgusting, isn't it?"

"Looks plumb purty to me," Dan said.

"Do you think we'll be able to hold them off till the soldiers come?"

"We will if we don't run out of barrels."

The third and finally the fourth barrel had been tossed out of the wagon and for the time being the ever-dwindling force of Blackfeet had been left behind when Dan was thrown off his feet by a terrific jolt. The wagon crashed to a stop. Dazed, he got out and stared glumly at the wagon's rear axle.

"What's wrong?" Anne called.

"Busted an axle. Help your grandpa over here an' I'll lift him down. Maybe one of the other wagons has got room for you."

The remaining four wagons had stopped. Tex and Hitchcock quickly carried the old man to another wagon and placed him inside, Anne climbing in with him. Dan swung atop his horse. As the wagons lumbered into motion again, he stared back across the plain.

"Well, here they come again. An' this time I reckon I'm plumb out of hole cards."

The Indians gained rapidly, pausing only long enough to make sure the broken-down wagon contained no whiskey. Finding that it did not, they vented their rage by setting it afire and then rode forward with savage yells.

"Right now," Dan said as Tex rode up beside him, "would sure be a fine time for them soldiers to show up."

"Your luck can't hold forever," Tex answered with a shake of his head.

Dan sighed. "No, I reckon it can't. Still—" Suddenly he broke off, cocked his head to one side and listened intently. "Say, did I just hear a bugle. . . ?"

ESCORTED by a battalion of cavalry, they reached Fort Buford shortly after dark, and there the army surgeon treated the wounded and put them to bed. When he looked at Grandpa Parrish, he smiled and nodded encouragingly.

"Painful but not serious. He'll be as good as new in a couple of weeks."

"Will he be able to talk again?" Anne asked anxiously.

"Of course."

The old man glared furiously at the surgeon, and from the look in his eye Dan reckoned that he'd just as soon be dead as unable to talk for two weeks. Hitchcock stared thoughtfully at Parrish, then turned to Anne.

"You lost everything in that wagon, didn't you?"

"Everything except—" Her eyes probed his for a moment. "—except grandpa and you."

"That's all that matters?"

"Yes, Max."

"You don't mind losing the money?"

"Not in the least."

A pleased smile spread over the Missourian's face. He seized Anne's hands. "I'm glad to hear you say that. I've wanted to marry you ever since we left Missouri, but I knew that your grandfather didn't like me and I was afraid the old goat would cut you off without a cent if you married against his wishes."

Ignoring the anger in the face of the inarticulate figure on the cot, he went on hastily, "Now that the money is gone, there's no reason why you can't marry me at once, is there?"

"Well—" She looked at him uncertainly, then smiled. "All right, Max. Whenever you say."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, Max, tomorrow."

Dan dropped his eyes to the floor, blushing self-consciously, as they kissed. Dog-gone, women were funny. Just to look at him, you wouldn't think any girl would see much in a big, contrary critter like Hitchcock, but here was this sweet little lady gone clean loco about him. It just went to prove that there was no accounting for tastes.

Parrish, from the look on his face, was about to have an apoplectic fit. "Acts like he wanted to tell us something," Dan observed mildly.

"Too bad we can't understand him," Hitchcock said indifferently, and kissed Anne again.

"Maybe if we brought him a pencil and some paper he could write it down," Tex suggested.

Anne shook her head. "He never learned to read and write."

Dan looked thoughtfully at the old man. "I reckon maybe he's upset over losin' the money."

"It doesn't matter," Anne said.

"Where was it hid?"

"He never told me. In the wagon, I suppose."

"Was it in greenbacks?"

"I imagine so."

Dan shook his head sadly. "Too bad. It's gone up in smoke now."

Parrish suddenly raised himself to a sitting position and started gesticulating wildly. The surgeon said in a firm voice, "You'll all have to leave the room. This excitement is bad for him."

Outside, Dan, Tex and Wolf Ear walked

slowly across the fort enclosure, Dan staring down at the ground as he meditated on an intriguing possibility. Tex muttered, "The old man sure throwed a fit over Anne and Hitchcock decidin' to get married, didn't he?"

"I wonder," Dan murmured, "if that was what his fit was about?"

"What else?"

"Tex, did you ever have a grandpa?"

"Course I did, but what the hell has that got to do with it?"

"Did he trust paper money?"

"Hell, no! He wouldn't take nothin' but silver or—" Tex broke off suddenly and stared at Dan. "What are you thinkin'?"

"Gold and silver coins don't burn. How would you and Wolf Ear like to take a little ride?"

THE MOON was standing straight overhead, bathing the deserted plain in a clear, translucent light, when they reached the spot where the charred remains of the wagon lay. Tex said, "It's goin' to be a hell of a job pokin' through those ashes."

"Eight thousand dollars is worth doin' a bit of pokin'," Dan answered.

They were starting to dismount when Dan suddenly gave a soft curse and swung back into the saddle. "Hey!" Tex demanded, "where you goin'?"

"Forget the wagon. C'mon, I'll bet my bottom dollar I know where that money is."

"Where else *could* it be but in the wagon?"

Dan didn't bother to answer. Riding a short distance back along the trail, he came across the last of the whiskey barrels that he had thrown out of the wagon. He picked it up and shook it. It was empty. He dropped it to the ground and started hacking at it with the hand axe. After a moment the homemade iron hoops gave way and the barrel fell apart. He dropped to his knees.

"Have you gone plumb crazy?" Tex said.

Dan grinned, and in answer handed one of the barrel staves to the Texan. The damp, sticky tar was studded with small round objects that glistened dully in the moonlight. "Take a look at that."

"Gosh-all-mighty!" Tex breathed. "Twenty-dollar gold pieces!"

"Parrish ain't nobody's fool. I figgered he must have that money hid in a purty good place or he wouldn't have been so free in talkin' about it. We could have looked in the ashes of the wagon till Doomsday an' never found it."

"How'd you ever guess it was in the barrels?"

"He didn't raise no rumpus when the wagon busted down an' we had to leave it. But he threw a fit when I tossed the whiskey kegs out to the Injuns. Also, he was mighty careful to explain to me why the whiskey tasted of tar. Said he had to line the kegs with tar so's the whiskey wouldn't eat through the wood. Any fool knows that whiskey don't eat through wood—even though it might eat metal."

"How come it didn't dissolve the gold?"

"There's only a few acids will dissolve gold, an' the acid in corn whiskey ain't one of 'em." Dan chuckled softly. "Now all we got to do is find them other three barrels, an' the eight thousand dollars is ours."

Tex was silent a moment, then he said cautiously, "Did you say ours?"

"Why not?"

"That ain't exactly honest, is it? It belongs to the old man."

Dan scowled thoughtfully. In a way, Tex was right. Still, in another way...

He said slowly, "He figgered on givin' it to Anne when he kicked off. But you heard what she said, didn't you?"

"Yeah. She said she didn't want it."

"Max Hitchcock is as proud as sin. It'd make him feel kind of bad if people said he married Anne just 'cause she had money, wouldn't it?"

"I hadn't looked at it that way, Dan, but I reckon you're right. Too much money is kind of bad for young folks just startin' out in life. Might make 'em unhappy. An' I sure would hate to see Anne and Max unhappy."

The thing Dan liked about Tex Randall was his faculty for always thinking of the other fellow. "Tell you what. We'll find the rest of the barrels, then we'll sit an' think a spell on whether we'd ought to take the money back to Anne and the old man or just keep ridin'."

"That," Tex said, "sounds like a mighty sensible scheme."

So that was what they did. Kept riding.



An eerie blue flame stabbed across the sky. That's when Ben Starr saw the Devil....

THE SAGA OF OLD S-H

By CLIFF M. BISBEE

How could Old Ben Starr rid his range of that strange longhorn hoodoo that had turned Half Star Ranch into a chunk of burned-over hell, made his pardner his blood enemy, and condemned a pioneer kid to a life of deadly silence?

GENERALLY speaking, not many a range-bred animal starts out in life with a sure-enough fancy name. Of course most every cowpony gets a handle tacked onto him during the busting period, usually by the puncher who does the riding. They'll call a horse Bender or Wiggle or Dynamite, or maybe just name him by his color, or a salty cuss word what seems to fit.

It also frequently happens that a steer or

beef cow earns some kind of handle like Cactus or Busted Horn or Jughead. Old S-H, though, was christened about ten minutes after he was born.

Ben Starr's voice was husky and his faded eyes watered as he stared down at the skinny, damp little animal. The tame cow was sandpapering it with her tongue.

"The first one borned to the new spread, pard! First he-calf for the Half Star iron."

"You bet!"

Karl Hanford was grinning all over as he watched the calf make a teetering effort to stand. "This one's the first, Ben. But not the last! From here on, everything rides nice and even with our ranch."

Ben squinted wisely and nodded. He'd been cow-nursing a long time, Ben Starr had; he could see plenty of tough jerky ahead. But there was no sense damping the kid's spirits.

"With luck, you and me will build up our little ol' Half Star outfit to where we're shipping a hundred head a season. Maybe more."

The two of them squatted there on the green spring grass—the lean oldtimer and the tall Swede cowpoke with bright blue eyes and a wind-tossed mop of yellow hair. They held the dangling reins of their ponies with careless fingers and watched the calf nose around to find its first meal.

The warm cow smell was good in their nostrils. For a long time they were lost in that awesome magic felt only by men who have worked hard and sweat generously and who can finally see the start of a dream come true.

Karl reached out and grabbed Ben by the sleeve. "Ben! The first calf. It has to have a name already. Svea says it brings good luck."

"Svea Jensen, huh?" Ben twisted around so he could grin into Karl's serious, round face. "That sweetheart of yours reads more danged signs into things than any Hopi medicine man I ever heard of. Never seen a purty head more full of granny tales."

He laughed at the quick bridling in his partner's eyes. "Don't raise a heat, son. I guess there ain't nobody as superstitious as a saddle-warped old cowhand, at that. If Svea's comin' over to keep house for us one of these days, reckon she gets her say-so."

Karl nodded and poked a finger into the calf's warm side, chuckling to see its tail jerk at his touch. "It won't be an ordinary calf, this one. A real name it should have yet." He slapped his leg hard with a big palm.

"We call this little yigger after the both of us! Starr Hanford. How's that for a name?"

Ben tugged dubiously at his ragged, sandy mustache. "Starr Hanford, huh? Sounds like one of them ten thousand dol-

lar bulls to the State Fair." He rolled it around silently on his tongue a time or two, then grinned. "Okay, pardner. You named us a calf."

STARR HANFORD. The name stuck, though they soon shortened it to S-H. Naturally that became *Old S-H*.

The speckled calf prospered, and so did the Half Star ranch.

Karl and Ben had run into plenty of the usual rough going, putting their ranch into operating shape. Now things took a swing for the better and of course Karl laid it to Old S-H.

Karl's personal luck surely went up a fair piece. Svea Jensen finally gave in to his long and hopeful courting. She became Mrs. Hanford when the wagon preacher drifted through the Valle Grande early in September. Brought her hope chest, her clothes and her few other treasures over to the homestead cabin on Bobcat Creek.

Svea and Karl received several wedding gifts from people around the Valle, including the first waffle iron that was ever seen in that part of the country. Old Anker Jensen brought it out from Frisco on his last trip there with a carload of steers. A salesman in a big store sold Anker the contraption and gave him printed directions which explained how to use it.

Mrs. Jake Weihut presented the newlyweds with a five-gallon can of pure sage honey, and Ben Starr had himself a time bragging to cowmen and punchers in Whisper Smith's saloon at Centro. Ben's only bad habit was throwing an occasional whingeroo, and he made a bang-up job of one soon after Svea and Karl were married.

"You saddle-benders sure ain't cottoned onto the kind of luck that good-omen calf brung to me. I got most the benefits of bein' married, and none of the grief." Ben tossed muddy eyes around at his grinning listeners and smacked his lips real loud.

"Ought to rustle your whiskers over a pair of them new fangled, caulk-marked flapjacks Svea turns out on that waffle brandin' iron her old man give her. With a cupful of sage honey sloshed over 'em, you never tasted anything better. Svea can't hardly stompede me'n Karl away from the table."

Svea was just a little wisp of a strawberry blond, but she worked! She made

butter, cheese and soft lye soap; baked light bread, washed clothes and turned out more hand-sewed things and fancywork than any woman in the Valle. In spite of all that it was a pure marvel the way she could whip through her housekeeping and still get out to barns and pastures for an hour or two.

Karl was mighty proud the way Svea loved animals. She turned Starr Hanford into a regular yard pet until they made a steer of him, when he'd already grown too rough to handle. Old S-H went through the dark rite of becoming a steer while he was still a chunky calf, but he had grown into a big oversized long-yearling before ever a hot iron was clapped to his speckled hide. Then the partners branded him with his own initials instead of the Half-Star. Svea claimed Old S-H was too proud to be wearing any man's brand.

Things kept prosperous in the Valle Grande.

The rains came, gentle and fairly often through the wet seasons. There were no gully-washing cloudbursts that run off into the creeks without benefit to the range. Grass sprouted thick and plentiful. Valle beef and Valle children grew fat and sassy.

Old S-H came and went as he pleased over the range—watching new calves coming on, seeing readied steers go off on that one-way trip to market. When Ben or Karl happened to run onto S-H out along the creeks or grassy arroyos, he would stand and gaze at them with a bold air, understanding that he was a privileged character. He never spooked off with tail in the air as the other animals did. Always S-H stood his ground with head thrown up and big splayed feet turned wide apart, so homely you wanted to laugh. But there was some-

thing kind of regal about him too. Mostly he grazed off by himself.

"Uppity as one of these Frisco drummers," Ben Starr used to chuckle.

It seemed there was no end to Half Star fortune. Even the thing Karl had been dreaming about all along got ready to happen along in that third year.

Svea took a mysterious buggy trip to town one afternoon—after first tossing a handful of new hay into a south wind to make sure the sign was right. She drove in alone, without a word to Karl. But she was there in the kitchen doorway that evening to meet him, and there was such a look in her big gray eyes that Karl gave her an extra squeeze and kiss before he headed for the wash basin.

Svea followed, hanging onto his arm. "Karl—it—I—Doctor Holbrook says we're going to have a baby!"

And when she could get her face unsmothered from Karl's shirt, she smiled dreamily and told him something else. "It will be a boy."

Karl threw his shoulders back and looked at her slantwise. "How could you be knowing already?" He laughed and shook her playfully. "It's six girls I put in my vote for, every one just like you."

"No, but, Karl. Seriously. Last night I dreamed I saw a new moon lying on its back, with a big white star between the tips. Besides, hasn't Old S-H brought us everything so far?"

"Ah, shoo!" said Karl. But his tone was low with the awe her sign talk always gave him. He felt her tighten in his arms and it seemed like a shadow made her eyes grow dark as creek water in a thunderstorm.

"Karl," she whispered, turning up her

**TOPS
FOR
QUALITY!**



face. Her small fingers dug into his arms.

"Karl, we've been so lucky! We mustn't ever let anything happen to S-H."

IT WAS not the kind of night Ben Starr would have picked when Svea's time came. She had planned to stay with the Weihunts, who lived within a mile of Centro. Karl was to take her in on a Friday, and they had a box of clothes packed. All the day before Svea felt kind of queer. She was a little bit suspicious, yet according to the way they had it figured out with Doc Holbrook, there was a week or more to go.

That night while Karl was finishing up the dishes he noticed Svea sitting at the table with her little fists clenched up. She was watching the clock and counting, lips softly moving. She looked at Karl then and answered his unspoken question, quietly.

"I think Ben had better go fetch the doctor."

It was not much after dark. There was a strong hot wind blowing up the Valle when Ben Starr went down to the corral and caught up his horse. He was saddling when the first weird flash of lightning came. A searing blue glare that probed every dark corner of the barn. Ben grunted with the surprise of it and his horse reared back with a frightened snort.

A yellow rectangle sprang into being up at the house and Karl's big figure was limned there in the kitchen doorway. "Did you see that, Ben?" His voice was frayed by the wind.

"Skeered my pony," Ben shouted back.

Svea had come to stand with Karl and she called down now, the calmness gone from her. "Be careful, Ben! On such a night as this there are evil things afoot."

Ben creaked into the saddle, yelling: "Make that young'n wait for us!"

He rode out into the darkness and the baking wind. It was the first time he had ever heard a note of fright in Svea's voice. He guessed it must be on account of her time sneaking up on her this way.

Two more lightning flashes came on the way to Centro. There is always something unearthly about an electrical storm. Ben wasn't scared but he figured he could do with a drink. By pushing a little he made it to town just under an hour and he went directly to the doctor's house and told what he had to tell.

Then he said: "Reckon I'll mosey down to Whisper's for a spell, Doc. 'Less you want me to ride over to tell Mrs. Weihunt."

"I can take the south road past Weihunt's and make better time," Holbrook said. The gray little doctor smiled. "Don't drown yourself in jackass whiskey."

Ben realized his own grin was a bit wobbly. "I wouldn't take your job, Doc, for seven million dollars!"

It was nearly eleven when Ben Starr left the saloon. He had trouble getting on his horse, mainly on account of the shotgun. When Whisper Smith wasn't looking he had snitched the gun from under the bar, just in case he ran into any of Svea's devilspirits.

He kept to the center of the street so the buildings would not close in on him. Everything went all right until he hit a place where the road dipped into a brushy arroyo. The sky was dead still and black as the inside of a fireplace.

And then a flash came. Ghostly light seared the arroyo. The brush and rocks and a jagged cutbank stood out clear as they would on a sun-scorched midday. Ben swore, yanked on the reins and the horse came around trembling.

The blackness was twice as thick after the flash. Ben got his horse going forward again but they both knew the Devil was somewhere close in that stifling darkness. Ben hugged the shotgun to his chest, laid one gnarled finger on the trigger.

Soon he heard a scraping, a sly rustling in the brush off to his left. He jabbed eyes toward the place but he couldn't see a foot beyond his own nose. And right in that same second there came another sharp glare of blue flame in the sky. That's when Ben Starr saw the Devil face to face. The Big Ramrod himself.

The Devil had horns. Wicked sharp horns and great splayed hoofs and a forked tail that was ten feet long. The tail kept lashing back and forth and with every lash it cracked so loud Ben's eardrums nearly broke and fire was all around that Devil.

Drunk as he was, Ben's reflexes worked fast. He swung the shotgun around and let the Devil have both barrels.

The roar of the gun and the stab of flame from its muzzle blasted all the electric fire right out of the sky. In the utter nothingness that followed, Ben heard a crashing

in the brush, and one bellow of rage from the Devil. Ben threw down the shotgun, gave his horse the spurs—which was totally unnecessary—and they lined out of there in a fair hurry.

He had been sprawled in the ranchyard for a full hour before Karl and Doc Holbrook found him.

"Stewed, by yingo," growled Karl. They carted Ben in to his bunk and Karl shook his head. "Tomorrow afternoon comes before he knows it's a boy already. Doc, you sure it's nothing wrong with that baby? Svea sees that last big swoosh of lightning yust in the last minute. Fifteen times I got to tell her everything is fine."

"Healthy a boy as ever I brought into the world," Holbrook snorted. "You tell Svea to forget her signs and omens. Tell her to bear down making milk for Little Karl."

A COUPLE of days later someone found Whisper Smith's shotgun lying in the weeds. After Ben Starr sheepishly related his Devil tale, what he could remember of it, Karl rode down there. He discovered spotsches of blood, and tracks where a steer had lumbered off through the brush. One glance at those wide-split tracks told him they'd been made by Old S-H. He cold-trailed to the edge of the malpais and there lost the sign.

"Into the badlands that steer has gone to die," Karl predicted.

Right off, things began to go wrong. Karl broke two pitchfork handles in one day. Svea's calico riding pony gorged itself on green corn and died. Ben Starr sat on the upper half of his mail-order teeth, cracked it right across the middle. Then the windmill in the yard broke a gear; Karl couldn't fix it and the blacksmith over in Centro said the best thing was to send to the factory for a replacement, which would take two or three weeks. Meanwhile Karl had to pull water out of the well in a bucket. What with all the washing Svea must do for Karl Odney Hanford, Junior, it seemed Big Karl spent a good half of his time hauling on that blasted well rope.

When Ben spotted turkey vultures wheeling over the far range he rode out by himself, half afraid of what he'd find. But it wasn't the remains of Old S-H. A government trapper over east of Sixmile Wash

had been poisoning varmints and what Ben found, plumb in the middle of Half Star's best waterhole, was the badly putrified carcass of a coyote.

The spring was so polluted that cattle passed it by for weeks. They drifted to another part of the range, crowding Obie Campbell's stuff. Obie, a great hand for legal rights and priorities, stormed over to the Half Star and lodged formal protest, threatening suit in a court of law.

Svea insisted that Old S-H was responsible for the way things were going. "He's not dead," she told Karl, time and again. "S-H was frightened in that electric storm and was coming to Ben for protection. And Ben turned on him, filled him full of shot. You just can't treat a good-luck animal in a shabby fashion like that, or the luck runs sour."

It must have been all of a month after Little Karl's arrival that Ben was up in the malpais one day, with the idea of maybe spotting one of the cougars that had taken to killing calves and colts around the range. Away up in a narrow gully he came across the tracks of Old S-H. He lost the sign right off and couldn't pick it up again in the rocks. He saw nothing of the lions but went home that night knowing Svea was right about Old S-H.

Awhile later a cowpoke from Sixmile came by and stopped for a talk. The cowpoke was all excited.

"I was huntin' a stray pony this mornin'" he said. "What you s'pose I run into?"

"Well, what?" snapped Ben Starr, whose temper had grown waspish.

"That big old red-specked mosshorn steer of yours. Man, that critter's blind as a 'dobe wall!"

"Blind?" Karl echoed the word dully, staring. Ben Starr just stood there with his mouth open.

The Sixmile puncher bobbed his head and scratched a light on the shank of a spur. "Yep! I seen his eyes plain and they're both milk-white. Look like cooked fish-eyes. That steer can't see his own shadow. But mister, he sure can travel through them rocks up yonder. Disappeared 'fore I knowed whichaway he went."

It wasn't long before the Hanfords realized they had a serious worry on their hands. Something was wrong with Little Karl.

For all Doc Holbrook's early assurances it soon became plain enough to everybody that the baby's vocal apparatus was out of whack. His squirmy little body was round and firm, his eyes were bright as blue chips punched from the sky and Big Karl swore the little feller drank more milk than any two growing calves on the ranch. To look at—and to wash diapers for—Little Karl was in every respect a normal baby boy. His lung-power was another matter.

From the very first his voice had been weak, a kind of muffled bleat. As the months rolled on Karl and Svea got so they listened all the time for happy gurgles or a really lusty cry. There was only that pitiful little bleat—you had to go take a look at him to tell whether he was sad or happy.

For nearly six months Doc Holbrook held out stubbornly on the theory that Karl and Svea were having first-baby jitters. All the same Doc made several examinations of the baby's throat and finally admitted to the parents that he had written to a medical-school friend, now a specialist in Chicago.

"Nick Arnold will come see the little squirt soon as he can, maybe when he vacations in June."

By the time Doctor Arnold came—Little Karl was close to a year old then—the range was parching in the worst drought since '93. Karl had broken his left wrist falling from a wild new bronc, and the Half Star barn burned to its foundation along with most of their hay and considerable equipment. Ben Starr was tossing his whingeroots more frequently, and Karl had become morose and irritable. The partners began to quarrel—those two who had worked so hard and so long together.

Like so many arguments between former staunch friends, the rift between the partners started unreasonably over nothing—but it widened like an August fire burn in dry grass.

While each of them was secretly appalled at this nonsense, neither would budge an inch. For three weeks not a word went between them unless Svea was there to relay the message. Of course Svea bawled them both out more than once, but it did no good.

It came to the point where Ben Starr rolled up his bed and moved into a weathered little shanty that stood half a mile from

the ranch yard. Bought himself a skillet and coffee pot and batched as he had done in years gone, cooking over an outside campfire because there was no stove in the shack.

"Old S-H has surely put a curse on this ranch," Svea declared sadly.

Before that, though, Doctor Arnold had made his visit. He spent quite awhile with Little Karl, then began telling them a lot of things about vocal cords, sound control and speech development. Svea brushed it all aside and asked tensely, "You mean he—he's *mute*, Doctor?"

"Not exactly. Most mutes are born deaf—they could talk if they knew how to form words. Your baby is definitely normal in hearing. I can't see anything wrong with him. The impulse to make his vocal cords stand up and sing just seems to be lacking. Later, perhaps this fall, we'll take him to Chicago and we'll just hope to do him some good. That's all I can promise."

"It's a spell. S-H hates us now." Svea had stared at Little Karl, a stricken look on her pale face. Arnold had shrugged, not understanding, of course.

THE LONG dry period had everybody in the Valle Grande plenty worried. Lots of beef was sold off that summer at low prices in order to take some of the load off the parched range and the few scummy waterholes that were left.

There came a time when it looked as if the drought might break. For two or three days little wispy clouds drifted in over the hills and gathered into thin layers. They bunched and faded and drifted aimlessly about for those two or three days and Ben Starr watched them morosely from his shack.

On the fourth morning he crawled out of his bunk to find the sky as flat and brassy as ever. He walked out for a good look and felt the withered feed so dry underfoot that it crunched like gravel. He swore steadily for two minutes, with a terrible feeling of helplessness.

Then his somber gaze switched over to the bare, tangled ridges of the malpais and for just a minute, there in the writhing heat waves, it seemed that he could see the clumsy box-car shape of Old S-H pawing the ground up and snorting fire and casting his malevolent curse out over the Valle.

Ben walked stiffly back inside the shack.

He dug his battered old rifle out of a corner, brushed off the spider webs. Jamming some shells into a pocket he went outside, saddled up and rode out across the flats, with the heat fanning up around him as if he were crossing Paul Bunyan's smoking-hot griddle.

There was a small seepage spring away up in the badlands. Just a piddling ooze in the rocks where maybe a quart or two of brackish water gathered. Bighorn sometimes watered there, and so did cougars. Ben figured it was likely enough that Old S-H was using that spring. Even with the drought blotting up waterholes down here in the Valle that seepage might hold if it came from a deep seam.

So Ben Starr headed directly for the badlands spring.

It was a stiff two-hour ride. When he got within a mile or so he began to see steer tracks in the rocky dry earth. He hit the deepworn sheep trail he remembered and it was easy to see Old S-H had been using it regularly. There were places in that trail where it didn't seem a blind animal could travel.

Finally Ben Starr came to the dish-shaped basin where the spring was located and he saw a thing he would not soon forget. Old S-H was standing a few rods from the seepage, backed up against a vertical cliff. Crouched in front of him were

a pair of scrawny cougars, a male and a female.

From the looks of it they'd been worrying the steer for quite some time. The steer's head was lowered and twisted to one side. Both ears were ripped to bloody shreds, and there were several great gashes along one flank.

Ben could see that both the old steer's eyes were weirdly pale and obviously sightless. It gave him quite a jolt. He slid off his horse and crept forward.

The male lion was crippled in a leg and the female bore a place on one shoulder where the hide lay open, showing an inch-wide path of red flesh. Old S-H had got in a few licks too.

Ben hunkered there in the rocks as the male cat sprang forward suddenly, only to be driven back by a vicious toss of the steer's thick horns. Then Ben checked the load in his rifle, still gripped with the thing he had come to do. He raised the gun and was sighting at the center-whorl of hair on the steer's forehead, when a movement up on the rim opposite caught his eye.

He lowered the gun to look and there stood Karl Hanford with a carbine cradled in one arm.

Karl spotted Ben at the same time. He picked his way around the rim and crouched down beside his partner.

"Those cougar kill him, by yingo. We watch."



WAY FOR THE VIGILANTES!

By William Heuman

The Hounds had turned San Francisco into a seething murderers' paradise, and Cass Richmond, the one man who might break their dread hold, knew that if he moved against them, his city would be a scorching, hell-hot holocaust, and his life would run out through the back-shoot bullets of the one man he loved and trusted!

You won't want to miss this thrilling saga of old San Francisco heading your way in the February issue of .44 WESTERN MAGAZINE.

Other top tales of the frontier by such ramrods of Western fiction as Olmsted, Cushman, Roan, Windas and many others. Get your copy at your nearest newsstand now!

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Ben was shocked to realize Karl drew pleasure from that brutal fight below. Of course Karl had come up to try and cut the spell S-H had laid upon the Half-Star and the Valle. Ben was swallowing a hard knot in his throat when Karl suddenly whispered: "Look!"

Both the cougars charged in at once, with vicious snarls. The male leaped high to clear those jutting horns while the female flashed close to the ground and arched upward toward the steer's throat.

Acting by some acute sense, Old S-H lurched onto his hind feet. While his horns caught the male cat in the belly and flung him against the cliff, the splayed front hoofs came down upon the female. The cougars yowled with pain, scrambling to retreat. But they had inflicted several fresh wounds with slashing claws and from the wounds blood poured.

Old S-H wagged his head and turned those black sightless eyes on his snarling tormentors.

"Long as he stands up, it's even," Karl said, low-voiced. His gaze never left the basin. "When he grows weak in the knees, look out. Those cougar finish him quick like everything."

The cougars kept waiting a chance to slide in for a lethal slash with their curving white fangs. But the steer always seemed to know when either of the cats was about to spring. He met every charge.

Yet the time came when that homely box-car body wavered and S-H went to his knees. His head swayed and the sightless eyes rolled. Now the cats flattened, tails lashing, sinuous bodies tense.

On the instant Old S-H let his nose sink to the ground, both cats surged in for the kill.

Ben was never sure afterwards how his gun came to his shoulder. Or who fired first, he or Karl. Both rifles cracked—and both those scrubby mountain cats dropped in their tracks.

For a long minute or two Old S-H stayed there with his nose resting on the ground. Only his ragged, bloody ears had jerked upward at the rocketing blare of the two guns. Slowly he raised his head, held it there heavily. In another minute the steer heaved up to his feet, stumbled over the dead cougars and waddled heavily to

the spring. He sucked at the scant seepage, taking his time, while blood dripped from his wounds onto the hot rocks.

Neither of the partners moved as they watched Old S-H plod up the far lip of the basin. On a flat spot the steer smelled at the ground, turned ponderously around and slowly settled to rest. Those weird, pale eyes seemed to be staring out over the shimmering lake of yellowish haze that was the Valle Grande.

Ben Starr and Karl Hanford swung to face each other then, and each of them let out a long supply of pent-up breath. Sweating, still silent, the partners gripped hands.

Without uttering a word they turned toward their horses. Luck was finished for them—Good Luck or Bad Luck. Now they could go on as two partners can, to fare the good and the bad together, no longer under the spell of any magic symbol.

THEY WERE back in the Valle but still a mile or more from the ranch house, when Svea came riding out to meet them.

"It's something happened," Karl said.

He spurred forward to meet her and Ben trailed behind. Svea's face was pale.

"Karl, he talked!"

"Shoo, now, take it easy honey." Karl spoke soothingly. "Tell me."

"But Karl, I mean it. He talked. He said 'Mama.' Sarah Weihunt heard it too. She's with him now. He said it over and over! *Oh, Karl!*"

She was crying now.

Karl got down slowly, kind of shaky. Then he was holding her tight in his arms.

Ben chewed a minute and spit, and for a second or two thought the wind had blown it back into his face. Then with a kind of dumb, staring wonder he realized it wasn't spit—but drops of rain! Honest to Pete drops of good wet rain, right out of the sky, which had become overcast as he and Karl rode down out of the malpais. They'd been so absorbed in what had happened that they never noticed.

Svea and Karl came out of their happy, laughing trance, and they noticed the rain too. They all stared at each other, startled, and then the three of them started home.

Take a jaunt down into the Valle Grande country, any time. You'll still hear the leg-end of Old S-H.

FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBINS



Original ancestor of the many tales concerning the unusually patriotic response elicited by our national anthem is a story that is laid in Dallas, Texas, and concerns Jack Ship-O-War Harris, a gunman who had served a hitch in the Navy and was well known for his fervent patriotism. With a posse at his heels, he burst hysterically into the home of Fred Tecora, holding a trembling gun in either hand. One of the ladies, displaying great presence of mind, went to the piano and struck up The Star Spangled Banner. Harris sprang rigidly to attention. The lady played on until the sheriff arrived.

When a wicked horse threw Johnny Beaver, an Indian scout, halfway across the stableyard, Johnny was delighted to find that both his arms and both his legs were broken. "This is my lucky day," he grinned prophetically as they revived him, and he nodded toward the retreating cloud of dust on the horizon that showed where a detachment of troops had ridden out to find the dangerous Arapahoes. Time proved Johnny was right. He had been scheduled to lead that scouting party. None of them ever came back.



Toward the waning days of the gold rush, it was not unusual for half a dozen or more poverty-stricken miners to pool their money and food and share equally whatever claims were staked. A rare case of joint ownership, however, was the famed "Six Women Mine" near Nogales which was found and mined exclusively by six hard-working prospectors' wives who one morning staged a small revolution, leaving their husbands home to do the washing and baking and starting out themselves with pick and shovel. Within twelve hours, "beginners luck" paid off with a rich silver lode that yielded the women, over a ten year period, some \$120,000 apiece.

William Kruge, illiterate, hardworking rancher of Helena, Montana, was always ashamed of his own lack of education and when his only child, a daughter, Sarah, grew up, he sent her to New York to attend an exclusive finishing school. "They'll make a real lady out of her there," he used to say. "No more rough cowhand company for my Sary." But Sary had other ideas. Graduating from finishing school, she met and married a New Yorker—a holdup man by profession—and when the father next saw his expensively-finished daughter, it was through iron bars after an unsuccessful attempt by the newlyweds on the Helena Bank.





Cole cut into the roadway,
shooting. There might still
be a chance. . . .

Gun-Devils of Happy Valley

—By **HARRY F. OLMSTED**—

A Stirring Saga of a Broken Man Who Came Back



Chapter I

BROKEN MEN WITH BROKEN GUNS

TWO RUMORS brought a smile to the wide lips of Cole Danvers the day he came home to Happy Valley. The first: Big Bill Graeme and surly John

Seven years of bitter hell-on-earth Cole Danvers passed in that trap of a wheelchair, storing up hot hate. . . . And in just seven smoky seconds, he dealt that hate from the business-end of his Colt, to bring new life to the bloody ground where burned in tragic, crimson letters the grimmest Frontier lesson: "Sheep and cows don't mix!"

Tuxbry had put their fabulous partnership behind them. The second: the Mitten Spread and the Bar Boot were at war.

In a way, these bits of tale were one, for Bill Graeme owned the Mitten, and Tuxbry the Bar Boot. Between them, they owned and controlled seventy-five percent of Rimrock County's one hundred thousand square miles of mountain, mesa and high valley range. Their power was respected in every town of the county. Cattle, trading, politics, and even the lives of the people hung upon their edicts; there was no appeal. For years they had pulled as a team, and no man had successfully stood against them. But now. . . .

"It was bound to come sometime," said the stage driver, with a gloomy look at Cole on the box beside him. "Bill an' John is both hard-headed. Folks has showed fear of 'em an' give 'em a free rein. Men is like hosses. Let 'em git used to carryin' the bit in their teeth an' they'll spook fer the hell of it. An' likewise go to kickin' an' bitin' at one another. Bill an' John both got so much they was sure to want it all."

Cole didn't answer. Relaxed against the coach top, face turned up to the clean white thunderheads boiling above the tumbled horizon, he let memory have its way. Life reached back to him out of a dead past—hopes, fears, joys, bitternesses. A seven-year banishment had been a long time for one who loved a horse and a rope and the freedom of the trails. Seven years—from seventeen to twenty-four—one year in bed, one in a wheelchair, one taking graduated exercises, all the time in a friendless Eastern city where the smell of sage was only a memory.

The chapter that lay behind those lost years was closed—with a bookmark. Deliberately, Cole had left the bookmark in place, barring from his mind the grim and bloody chapter. But now, well in body, he was ready to pull the mark and resume the narrative to its fated conclusion. One question kept recurring. How would the new feud between Bill Graeme and John Tuxbry affect him? Would it sharpen or dull the swords turned against him?

The stage driver reined his ponies off the road. With a squeal of brakes and a lifting cloud of dust, the coach drew up before a long adobe relay station. The driver hit the ground as hostlers came hurrying

up out of the stables with fresh teams. "Halfway House! Half hour for dinner."

Passengers stepped from the coach, one by one. A tobacco drummer. A tired looking, sallow-faced girl bound for one of Felicity's dancehalls. A Chinaman. And the girl with the jaunty little hat perched atop her ebon hair. Cole had noticed her when she entered the coach in Phoenix, had admired the high color in her cheeks, her free-limbed, robust build and the proud carriage of her head.

Cole followed the others in and presently found himself sitting at the long table, beside the girl who watched him with amusement dancing in her eyes. "Family style," she said, with satisfaction. "Three years since I've sat at table like this."

Cole liked the deep, husky quality of her voice. "Seven years for me," he answered. "It's just one of many Western ways I've missed."

"Then you *are* from the West? I thought so. I know how you feel. It's good to be back, isn't it?"

Cole nodded, watching her load her plate. There was something familiar about her features; he felt he should know her. He would have spoken his name but something bigger than himself held him silent. He was heading into trouble and whatever mystery there might be regarding his identity and aims was all in his favor. They ate in silence.

When she had finished her meal, she rose and flashed him an understanding smile as she left the dining room. Later he saw her face, fresh and responsive, at the coach window as he strode to take his place on the box. He was musing pleasantly about her as the coach rocked out the road leading upward into the highlands.

Beside him, Mustang curled his whip over the straining ponies and sent a stream of tobacco juice downwind. "Saw you a-talkin' to Milly Graeme. Purty filly, ain't she? If I had a gal like her, I'd think twice before lettin' her come back from school into a fracas like's about to bust over Happy Valley."

Cole's face hardened. "Bill Graeme's daughter?"

"That's right. Let the Tuxbry crowd lay hands on her an' they got the war as good as won."

Cole grunted, felt quick depression touch him. He too was going to war, and against those two—Bill Graeme and John Tuxbry. In his book, one was as bad as the other. But he never had weighed the effect of his hatred upon the women of the two outfits. That thought sent his mind questing for ways of avoiding suddenly raised responsibilities.

COLE SAW Milly again when they pulled up to the porch of the Pinal House in Felicity. She got out of the coach and stood beside him, waiting for Mustang to unrope the boot and hand out her grip. "Looks the same, doesn't it?" she beamed, letting her eyes rove the long street. "And awful good, too. Hope you find it all you have dreamed. Adios."

"So long." Cole watched her carry the heavy telescope into the hotel.

Late afternoon. . . . Chill layering over Felicity. . . . Smells of pine, sage, meadow-hay pleasantly in Cole's nostrils.

He filled his lungs, scanning faces about the stage. He recognized many. Tall Charlie Hagerman the postmaster, down for the mail bags. Paunchy Cap Tilford, once Felicity's horrible example, now marshal. Peter Seccomb, Express and Telegraph agent. Others. All included him in their scrutinies.

Cole smiled. Small chance they'd recognize him as the stripling who had once called here for mail and supplies—the broken, beardless youth who had departed on a stretcher, seven years ago, with bullet-shattered spine. Confidently, he strode past them, boots clicking the walk, saddle roll carried on his left shoulder. He turned into the hardware store, buying shells for his .45. Afterward, at Chavez' Livery Barn, he bought a leggy bay pony and a worn saddle.

Not until he galloped from Felicity with the comforting gun at his hip was Cole sure he had put the East and seven years behind. He smiled at juniper and piñon, old friends marching up to meet him. Presently, he reined aside to Bobcat Spring, built a fire and let sounds of falling night fill empty places inside him. Night breeze whipping the scrub. . . . Coyotes wailing. . . . Hooting of the great hunter owl.

Breakfastless, Cole climbed Bobcat Peak in the dawn to scan the valley and to won-

der about its nesters and their modest homes. Haze still dimmed the bend of the Mazitzals, where Box L Star and U Bar gathered. Yonder, under Mogul Rim, Sawbuck and Crossed Rails had headquartered. His glance touched the neck where Cort Danvers slept, followed along the toe of Eagle Range where Double Diamond, Circle Dot, Anchor and Moccasin nestled. All was doubt to Cole, except what lay yonder at Broken Arrow. He had seen house and barn blazing, cremating his bullet-riddled sire.

Pictures came to Cole, vividly ugly. Again he heard that peremptory call from the dark, demanding Cort Danvers renounce the backing of the nesters in his race for sheriff, or die. He was still proud of his dad's defiance. Cort, five loyal cowhands and young Cole, held off that murderous attack until shells ran low, until smoke smothered them. When they ran for it, Cort Danvers died in his doorway. Four punchers fell trying for the corrals. A fifth, Pete Machado, caught Cole as he fell wounded and, after a nightmare of effort, got him to the doctor in Felicity.

Yes, Cole could imagine the Broken Arrow after Stallion Stallings got through. Barrel-chested Stallion with the swart Indian face and cruel *Chino* eyes. Troubleshooter for Graeme and Tuxbry, drawing regular pay from both.

"Stallion will pay for that fun," Cole promised, "if I live a day or a month."

Returning to the spring, Cole mounted and rode to the Sawbuck. A tired-faced slattern met him sourly, quieting five frightened youngsters to talk to him. No, Howie Pollet wasn't home. She didn't know when he'd return. Cole said: "Tell Howie to stir dust at Turkey Roost Sunday midnight."

She nodded grimly and Cole rode away, sick inside. At the T J's, similarly, there was neglect rather than ravishment. Cole roused a lank, goggle-eyed youth from his bunk, but could learn nothing of Farley Kent. He suspected this to be the toddler, pride of Kent's heart seven years ago. "Tell him," Cole said, "to leave tracks at Turkey Roost, Sunday midnight." He rode away, and the boy stared stupidly after him.

It took Cole all day to visit half the nesters spreads that had supported Cort Danvers for sheriff. One like another—places of

fear, neglect, destitution. Nowhere did he find the man he sought; though at times he suspected his presence, until at dusk he rode to the Moccasin and found the owner—Max Senn, variously called Heinie and Dutchman and Porky because he was fat and ran pigs in the pinoaks. Max sat tilted back by his doorway, a long .45-90 resting across his knees. Cole dismounted, lifted his hand and saw fire light up the blue eyes, and then die.

"Velcome, mine friendt," Max called, thick-tongued. "I sit here mit mine gun of efenings. Sometime, meppy, I shoot a skunk. You are Cort Danvers poy, *nein*?"

"Nothing wrong with your memory, Max."

"Ach, noddings have I to do but remember. You know how many cows I sell in seven years? Not von cow. My neighbors neider. Yet does the range grow crowded? *Nein*. You know vhy und yet you come back here. Better you stay away, mine friendt, und liff vhere you can liff."

"Sunday night, come midnight, dust stirs at Turkey Roost, Max."

The German started. "I do not hear that since your fadder run for sheriff. Do he become sheriff? *Nein*. Vot you vant that you stir up old dust?"

Anger worked like yeast in Cole. "What do I want? I want the right for free men to walk free. I want payment for seven years of agony, and bullets in the back crying for settlement. I want to bring Happy Valley into the Union, Max, and that will not happen until I look down into the dying faces of Bill Graeme, John Tuxbry and Stallion Stallings and tell them why I killed them."

Max spat. "Dumkopf! Vhy take such chances? Those svine fight over the slops. They kill each odder. Donnerwetter, vhy spoil a good fight?"

Cole looked at him pityingly. "You've grown soft and afraid, Max. Like the others, who take to the brush when they see a horseman approaching. Good fight, eh? What the hell's good about it? Out of that fight will come one man, stronger, bolder, more cruel and arrogant than anything you've known."

He rose, moved to his horse and swung into the saddle. "I didn't come to ask help, Max, but to help you help yourselves. Maybe there are no men left in Happy Valley, only husks tossed aside by Bill Graeme and

John Tuxbry. I'll know Sunday night. Be there."

He touched his pony and rode away, never looking back. Two disturbing doubts rode with him. Had he come soon enough to save Happy Valley? Could he, by himself, shoulder the double burden of rallying the shattered spirits of broken men and bucking the ravening power of the Rimrock Pool?

Chapter II

HANG 'EM HIGH IN HAPPY VALLEY!

COLE DANVERS felt the tension the moment he entered the Ace High Saloon. It cloyed the air. It muted the calls of the dealers. It smashed revelry.

He paused a moment, letting his eyes run around the well-lighted hall. Familiar faces swam through the swirl of tobacco smoke. Down at the rear end of the bar stood Bill Graeme—tall, well-rounded, physically sound and finely groomed. A dozen hard-bitten gun riders lined the bar near him, joking, laughing, grimly ready. A scornful smile edged Graeme's lips as his eyes watched a poker game, where three men played behind banked chips tense with concentration.

Cole recognized one of the players as Poker Harry. On his right sat John Tuxbry, short, slight and peppery, unshaven and unkempt. The third gave Cole a start. He was Lasso Farr Linden—one-time fierce champion of Cort Danvers and owner of the Bar L, tucked in against the Maitzals.

Standing back against a pillar, thumbs in his two-gun belt, was giant Stallion Stallings, aloof and impersonal as a huge gargoyle. His face was moody, in repose, but his deep-set eyes under their black, bushy brows were glittering and afire, like those of a rattler about to strike. This man, whose treacherous deadliness was no secret in Happy Valley, was feared and hated. He claimed no friends and wanted none. His attitude now was that of a buzzard on a dead tree, patiently waiting for two mad bulls to come to grips and destroy each other.

Cole could feel the danger here but the set-up puzzled him. He was scowling as he clanked to the bar for a glass of whiskey.

"Looks like a hot game tonight," he told the bartender, jerking his head toward the poker table. "Like it might be for blood."

The menial looked him over, grinning. "You ain't guessing so wild, neighbor. It's one round in the fight building between Bill Graeme and John Tuxbry. Game's been going on for months, with Graeme far ahead. Bill Graeme owns this place," he added. "He lets his houseman play for him." His voice fell to a hoarse whisper. "I'm guessin' that when Tuxbry's flat busted he'll try to kill 'em both."

Cole asked: "Ain't that Lasso Linden bucking them? Where does he fit in,"

The barkeep's eyes burned. "Lasso done right well for himself. Just how nobody seems to know. Both Graeme an' Tuxbry seem to think it was by wide-loopin' Pool cattle by the light of the moon. Anyhow, Lasso flashed a roll an' they let him into the game, figgerin' to smash him." A low chuckle. "It worked out some different. The boy's good. He's into both outfits for important money an' they let him play, hopin' to win it back. If they can't. . . ." He ran a finger suggestively across his lank throat.

Cole sipped his drink. "Gambling, eh? Is that the trouble between Graeme and Tuxbry?"

"Gambling, yes, but not poker. Gambling with politics and the fortunes of Rimrock County folks. Pullin' together, they grew powerful, an' then scairt of each another. At first, they took it out in cussin', but lately it's got outa hand. Week ago, John's half blind father was shot out of his saddle on the way to town. Yesterday, two of Graeme's riders was found hanging from a pine, near Forefinger Butte. War's a-

buildin', my friend, an' when it really busts loose a man's gotta be on one side or another. I'm stringing my bets with Bill Graeme."

He moved away to serve a patron, and Cole gave his full attention to the poker game. He saw Tuxbry shove his whole pile into the pot and Poker Harry cover the bet with a dry: "Calling you, Linden." He saw Lasso spread out his cards.

"Four aces, gentlemen. Anybody got a straight flush, or a royal?"

Poker Harry shrugged nonchalantly, lit a cigar. John Tuxbry found his feet, his wiry form shaken with terrible rage. His leathery cheeks jerked and his dark eyes lanced Lasso murderously. "Rotten!" he spat. "A dirty skin game!" His temper ran under full rein. "A lousy Graeme gambler an' a nester stool pigeon whip-sawing me out of my chips. All right, I lose. I've had enough. You've taken your last dime offa me. Next time I ante across this board it'll be with lead chips, backed by a full house—bullets an' sixes!"

A stir ran through the sparse crowd. Tuxbry men, gun-hung, pressed in. At the bar, Graeme men straightened, grew vitreous-eyed, alert. Poker Harry drawled:

"I think I wouldn't play poker if I were you, John. You haven't the temperament."

Lasso, raking in his chips, seemed remote and unconcerned. Only Cole, watching him, saw the flash and flare of triumph in his eyes. "Hard rubber for specie, Harry," he called, lazily. "I'm cashing out."

The gambler called for the gold from the safe, and while he bought back Lasso's chips, watched John Tuxbry stalk to the door, his men behind him. Fury flogged

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the Bar Boot faction, and a spark dropped now would have set off an explosion. At the entrance, Tuxbry turned to glare at coldly-smiling Bill Graeme.

"A skunk-stinkin' coyote's tapped the Tuxbry till an' drewed Tuxbry blood," he shouted, fiercely. "An' done it knowin' it meant war. From now on, gents, it's for keeps." He smashed out through the swinging panels, his men following.

These doors were still swinging as Cole caught the subtle signal from Bill Graeme to Stallion Stallings, who nodded, hitched his guns and stalked out the rear. Lasso was scraping his winnings into a tow bag and Cole somehow knew that signal concerned the taciturn cowman from Mazitzals.

Perhaps if Cole had not seen that look come to Lasso's face—something between hate and joy and fear—he would not have been moved to depart at that moment. He had left his message at the Bar L before knowing that Lasso was the one man who had fought back against the Pool. Cole needed him, more than any other, at the Turkey Roost rendezvous.

AS HE moved doorward, Cole heard Graeme's barked: "Out to the Mitten, you gun 'ranglers! John says he's playin' for keeps. Mebby he'll have the guts to make good his brags by hittin' at my home place. Hope he does. Get movin'!"

Cole glanced across his shoulder. Mitten men were straggling toward the rear entrance. Cole was at the threshold when the door swung in to admit a wizened, pimply diminutive in grease-spotted suit. He paused, squinting at Cole, his floppy hat tipped back, lax lips revealing snaggy teeth, weasel eyes running Cole up and down. "Sa-a-ay," he croaked. "I orta know you. Ain't you the whelp of—?"

"You're crazy," broke in Cole, stepping around him and out the door. Once on the walk, he broke into a run, ducking left at the corner of the Ace High and down the slot between the saloon and the adjoining building. Halfway back, he paused, staring through a dust-grimed window. The pimply, hang-dog diminutive was fawning up to Bill Graeme, who stood alone at the bar, his big eyes smoldering.

Even before he spoke, Cole knew the little scandal-monger's business with the

Mitten boss. Cockroach Coker—variously hostler, swamper and barfly, a failure at each—was a notorious spy and busybody. Through his genius he collected enough money to feed himself. Despised by everyone, he toyed along the edges of greater men's conflicts, seeking those who would pay for information or silence. Now he approached Graeme.

"Something you orta know, Mister Graeme."

Graeme stirred from his abstraction. "You!" he barked. "Get the hell away from me."

"For a dollar, Mister Graeme, I'll—"

"You'll get a kick in the pants if you don't get scarce."

"Something about Danvers, Mister Graeme. Remember?"

"What?" Bill Graeme changed. "Danvers? What Danvers?"

"The kid called Cole. Remember the button they taken outa here on a stretcher? For a cartwheel, I'll tell."

Graeme dug deep, spun him a coin. Cockroach caught it, bit it and slipped it into his pocket. "Cole Danvers is back in town, Mister Graeme, thank you, sir. He just this minute left the Ace High. I passed him at the door. No sickly kid either, but a tough looking gent with a gun hung on his ham. Now what's he aimin' to use that gun fer?"

"To hell with your opinions!" rapped Graeme. "Hey, Whitey!" The last of his gunmen, moving rearward, paused to look back. "Hustle out front and find the tall man who just pulled out of here. Fetch him to me."

Whitey hurried out the front entrance and Cole saw Lasso, taking his nightcap at the bar, turn to look after the gunman. Cole didn't wait for Whitey to ferret him out. He continued on back, hesitated until the last Graeme man had passed, then went to his horse. Riding across a vacant space, he found the street, catfooting his pony toward the Ace High and keeping in the shadow of the south awnings.

From a hundred foot distance, he saw Lasso leave the saloon, lugging his heavy burden, saw him move to the rack. Having tied on his winnings, Lasso mounted and reined his animal into the roadway. It was the signal for the four horsemen to converge on him, two from the east, two

riding past Cole. They came, neither fast nor slow, with deadly directness. Lasso, caught between them, swiveled his head and drew rein, as if uncertain of himself.

Someone called: "Linden!" A gun spat fire and Lasso went to the withers.

All four were shooting now, spurring in. Lasso's pony squealed, reared and broke into a run. Gunflame ran from his hand and a horseman yelled, rose in the stirrups and plunged into the dust. Cole chose that moment. He touched his pony, cut into the roadway, shooting. Another rider went out of his saddle and was whirled away, dragging from the stirrup. Another folded over his saddle horn and spurred out of the fight. The fourth man fled.

Cole brought his pony up, his eyes searching the fronts. Men came tumbling out of doorways and Cole ran for it. A few shots wheeled past him as he tore down the street. Then he had clattered over the puncheon-floored bridge and so into the scattered timber across the river.

In the swift, hot skirmish, Cole lost track of Lasso and his mind was full of worry for the man. For a mile or more, holding a free lope, he debated riding to the Bar L to see if he might be needed. It was a long way and if Lasso was hard hit he would never make it. Cole's visit would only needlessly alarm Lasso's woman. So he gave over the idea and turned eastward, threading the valley axis with old scenes and old memories pacing him.

He had fought hard against a lonely visit to the valley neck, but now there was no fight left. He gave the pony its head and let remembrance drift past on waves of sadness and regret. The carefree days were gone from Happy Valley, maybe never to return. Blood had stained the earth and more was certain to flow.

The crash of stirred water was loud as he forded the creek. He could hear the flow tumbling into the long swimming hole below. The trail tipped up onto the bench and suddenly the gaunt outlines of a windmill derrick lifted against the stars. The dark rectangle of the house foundation stopped him and he quit the saddle with the sweet odor of honeysuckle in his nostrils. Time had softened the scars. Weeds waved over the mound that held the ashes of Cort Danvers. Honeysuckle, springing

from the root, sprawled riotously over the ruins, honoring the dead that lay beneath.

Cole walked slowly to the spreading boxelder beneath which his mother slept. Vandals had not defiled it, but beyond, at the edge of the shadows, were four fresher mounds—graves of the punchers who had died in defense of their iron. Adventurous youngsters, overworked and underpaid, who had never questioned the extent of their responsibilities. They could have ridden away and lived to fight their own fights, but pride and loyalty and righteous anger had come first. Gravely, Cole saluted those graves and turned away.

Now he halted, stiffening. Through the insistent tap-tapping of the locked wind wheel in the night breeze, he caught a subtle warning from beyond the creek. Leading his pony into the encroaching brush, he pinched the animal's nostrils and watched five shadows ride into the one-time dooryard. Five men alighted with squeaking latigos and a heavy voice said:

"A fool's errand, boys. I told Bill Graeme that Danvers wouldn't be fool enough to come here. A smart feller, him. But as long as we're here, let's search the bunkhouse an' see if he's slept there."

The voice belonged to Stallion Stallings and it woke in Cole a poignant recollection of another night when that same voice had been uplifted in passionate exhortation to murder. The raspy venom of that voice lit hot but fully-reasoning anger in Cole. As the boot-echoes of these men receded and died in the sagging log building that had been the Broken Arrow bunkhouse, he debated the wisdom of stepping to their waiting ponies, cutting the cinches and stampeding the animals. In the ensuing gun fracas, he might at least get Stallings, partly evening the score. On the other hand, he might die. He had not returned to be killed before he settled with bigger game than Stallion.

He stood pat, waiting.

Stallion led his men from the bunkhouse, swearing. "Cripes! Nary a sign he's been around here. I'd like to know where he's stayin'. With one of them damned nester families, I betcha. If Bill hadn't been so chicken-hearted there wouldn't be a place in the valley where Danvers could hang his hat."

"Seems like," spoke up one of his

men, "you're expectin' a heap from one tenderfoot. What the hell can he do?"

Stallion snorted. "Don't hold no Danvers too light. They're a tough breed. Cole wouldn't never have returned here without some plan to tie kinks in our tails. All these nesters need is a leader; that's why I augered Bill into lettin' me beef Cole before he rouses 'em against us. We gotta get him, an' fast." They rose to the saddles. "From here we'll split out an' watch the nester places."

His voice tailed out as he led them down to the crossing. Cole let out a pent-up breath, caressing the butt of his gun. The thing he had feared was now a fact. He was a hunted man. His moves must now be covert and sly. The shadow of Stallion Stallings darkened Happy Valley, eclipsing the menace of the men who had hired him—men too drunk for power to see that their erstwhile tool was turning his sharp edge against them.

COLE SPREAD his saddle blanket at the edge of the brush, picketed his pony near the creek and lay down. It was a warm night and he was weary. He gave his mind to the momentous problem facing him, but consciousness deserted him and he slept. His dreaming ran into reality and he suddenly came awake, sitting on the saddle blanket, straining for sounds. He heard a step, down by the bunkhouse, slowly drew his gun and peered into the gloom.

He heard the squeal of a rusty hinge, knew somebody had entered the old log structure. A voice echoed but Cole could not catch the words. He got up, following the line of brush. He paused with leveled gun, sensing rather than seeing the form materialize in the dark portal. It could be a friend or it could be one of Stallion's manhunters. Cole pursed his lips and softly formed the beginning falsetto of the *Apache Riding Song*. Clear and louder, across the interval, came the answering refrain—a signal used long ago by Broken Arrow hands to rally and identify.

"Who's there?"

A shadow deepened in the doorway and starlight caught the leveled barrel of a pistol. "That you, Cole?"

"Yes. Step out!"

"It's me, *muchacho*. Pete Machado."

"Pete! You old sonuvagun." Cole leaped forward.

"Cole, *mi compañero!*"

They came together, fingers reaching for one another. In the halflight, Cole saw the man who, at the risk of his own life, had dragged Cole from the hell of Broken Arrow, hidden him, brought a medico and somehow raised money to get him to the famous spinal specialist in the East. During the hopeless years money had come to Cole each month—sometimes little, sometimes much, but always something against a mounting expense that even now was a staggering ransom on Cole's future. Cole choked up as he pummeled the dark little man and Pete wept unashamed.

"*Por Dios, amigo*, but I am glad to see you. You are grown so strong, but I fear for you. You should not have come. Now that you are here, you must go. Yes, Pete will help you get away. Happy Valley has changed."

"They're bound to be overconfident, Pete. How come you've stayed clear of them after helping me the way you did?"

Pedro laughed quietly, rolling a cigarette. "To skin the fox, my friend, you must first catch him. You remember Pat Coster, who owned the Anchor, near Eagle Peak? Pat got sick and I looked after him and his stock." He struck a match and in its tiny beam saw the deep lines of age and care in that once smooth olive face. "I lie in the rocks and watch for those who would rob old Pat. I never miss, *amigo*. That terrible night at the Broken Arrow is partly avenged, Cole."

"So you work for Pat Coster, Pete? I found nobody home when I called there."

"I did work for him, *amigo*, but now he is dead. He had no family so he deeded me the Anchor. I have had to kill, but I have made it pay."

"Uh-huh." Cole marveled at this fearless man. "You made it pay and you sent me the money. It's a debt I can never pay, Pete."

The Mexican snorted. "I do not know what foolishness you speak, Cole. What money I sent was yours. You see, I look after your Broken Arrow cattle too. There are more now than when you leave. The Pool, they get some but they pay high. Whatever I do for you, I pay myself, so forget it. You are not needed here, so you

better go away until the Pool is dead. They fight—"

"I know, Pete, and so will we fight them. We meet at Turkey Roost, Sunday midnight. If the boys have any guts left—"

"Maybe they have none, *compañero*. I do not know how they will feel. No man has dared to trust another. *Quien sabe?*"

"You'll come?"

"*Por Dios*, I don't like the idea. The minute they know you're back Graeme and Tuxbry will both be gunning for you."

"They know, Pete, and the death sentence has been passed. Stallion and his men were here. They're hunting me."

"Then I must hunt him." Pedro stood up. "If it is war, amigo, I play it their way—from the brush. What you do now, amigo?"

"First, I should see Farr Linden. They tried for him tonight, in Felicity, got him mebbe, I dunno. I can't understand him chumming around with the Pool bosses, right out in the open. What do you know about him?"

Pedro sighed. "When the squeeze came, Cole, Lasso seemed to quit us. He made a peace, whatever it is, with the Pool. They marketed his cattle and he used the money to buck Tuxbry and Graeme. I'm told he won big money. Maybe so. He's a lone wolf. If he was to learn your plans—well, all the Judases are not dead yet, amigo."

"I aim to weigh him," said Cole, thoughtfully. "Between what he says and what I can learn about him from Graeme and Tuxbry."

"*Por Dios*, you would talk with them?"

"Why not?"

"They will like very much for you to

come to them, Cole. Why commit suicide?"

"Never let a man think he's got you on the run, Pete. I came back to collect, not to hide and run like a coyote. Let's get some sleep."

Chapter III

COLD STEEL MANTRAP

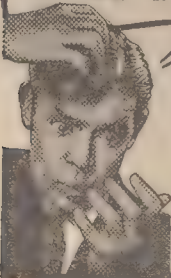
DAWN was breaking when Cole awoke to find Pete gone. Like a ghost, he had slipped noiselessly away. His going left Cole worried. Not that he had any doubt about the man to whom he owed his life, but only fear of what he might do. "I'll hunt him," Pete had said of Stallion. Cole regretted that he had not cautioned him against any premature action. The odds against them were already too heavy without adding the cost of attrition.

Hunger spurred Cole fiercely and he gave over the idea of riding to Lasso Linden's place. He saddled and crossed the creek and took the left fork of the trail. It led along a winding chain of meadows, all fresh and dewy and dotted with fat cattle and horses. This was part of the sprawling Mitten spread—a ranch started as a few hundred acres and now embracing thousands. Its perimeter was dotted with line shacks that once had been the homes of small cattlemen who had resisted Graeme pressure.

Where the trail crossed a jutting basalt point, Cole paused to look eastward into a pocket of the hills, where flat sunlight struck through tall cottonwoods, outlining the Big Graeme house, barn and outbuildings. There Old Zachary Graeme had settled in a day when the ruthless Apache

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roamed the land and a man's cattle were fair prey for white renegades. He had fought hard for his sway here and, rich and weary, had died and left a rare heritage of industry and honesty—left it to a son whose lusts were for added wealth and power.

How different this valley could have been, Cole thought, if Bill Graeme had been half the man his father was.

He took a last wistful look, thought again of the pretty girl in the coach, and rode on toward Felicity. He had covered half the remaining ten miles when he saw the lone rider debouch from a motte of willows and come racing toward him. His first thought was to withdraw into the brush and let the horseman pass. But knowing he was already sighted he kept on, tall in the saddle, his glance hard and cautious.

The rider drew near, reining up. Cole saw then that it was a girl in new denims, plaid shirt, half boots and Stetson. Milly Graeme. He saw the flash of recognition on her face, her smile of relief. "Wheew!" she whistled. "Am I glad its you. I was afraid you were one of John Tuxbury's men."

"How do you know I'm not, Miss Graeme?" Cole touched his hat brim.

Her smile faded. "I really know nothing about you," she confessed. "But, sa-a-ay, how do you happen to know my name? We were not introduced."

"At a time like this," said Cole, "it behooves a man to know names—and hang the proper tag on each one. Don't you think so?"

She nodded understandingly. Cole admired the picture she made, approving the obvious fact that she was at home on a horse. "In other words," she smiled, "you invite me to ask your name and to look at your tag. Is that it?"

Cole scowled. "You wouldn't be your father's daughter if you didn't have imagination. Use it and you should have your answer."

She stared intently, her color ebbing. "Cole Danvers," she murmured, and all her friendliness was gone in a pinch of fear. "Why did you do it? What could you have had against those three young Mitten riders to murder them? It must be true what they say about you—that you

are a killer hired by John Tuxbury. Whatever your reason, you're now an outlaw, certain to hang if they catch you. Sheriff Tilford's out with a posse now. I hope he catches you."

Fury touched Cole and fiercely he fought it back. "Your'e a Mitten," he said, icily. "The truth would be wasted on you. If I'm as bad as your father will try to paint me, you wouldn't have a ghost of a chance now, would you?" And while I'm on the subject, why are you riding out here alone?"

"That's none of your business," she snapped. "But I'll be more charitable than you are. My father is keeping me cooped in a hotel room, insisting the old home is no place for me. It's because of renegades like you that I want to be there—to fight you off. I went out the window at dawn, stole this horse and lit out. Nobody, Mister Danvers, is going to stop me." She whipped out a pistol and the hand that held it level upon him was steady as a rock. "Not even you, Mister Danvers."

Cole looked at her, never flinching, never stirring. "Why don't you shoot, Milly?"

Her anger drained away. "I should," she murmured, in a hauntingly hollow voice, "but—"

She said no more. Spurs sent her pony flashing away. Only once did she look back to see him sitting his horse, a straight and soldierly figure.

If Cole showed no emotion it wasn't because he didn't feel it. After all, she was a Graeme, one of an outfit he had returned to smash. Under different circumstances he might have turned normal admiration of her beauty into a vigorous campaign to break down her antipathy. But now the frowning ghost of Cort Danvers stood in the deep, black void between them, wrapped in the flames of hate, pointing a grisly finger toward the headquarters places of the two leaders of the erstwhile Happy Valley Pool.

With a deep sigh of regret, Cole tore his eyes from the flying figure of the girl and reined about. His pony sprang away at the touch of the spur.

THE HOUR was early for Felicity. Swampers mucked out of the saloons but otherwise the town slept—too deeply

even for a place habituated to late reveling and late rising. Cole cantered in and alighted at a rack. With only a glance both ways along the street he stepped into the Hong Kong Cafe.

Cole ate fast and fully, but his mind was on the talk of a pair of early breakfasters who debated the legal rights of a town-marshal-deputy sheriff who had tried, unsuccessfully, to impress them into a citizen's posse some hours earlier. Cole gathered that Cap Tilford had ordered this pair to ride after the murderer—Cole Danvers. When they had refused, he had promised them arrest and quick prosecution the moment he returned with the pelt of the murderer.

Cole smiled, listening to the pair draw upon their imagination, arguing the utter hopelessness of any common man facing such a demon killer. Presently these two departed, leaving Cole alone. He finished his meal, rolled and lighted a cigarette and paid the charge. As he stepped out, he saw two people emerge from the livery barn. Cole withdrew into the doorway to watch Bill Graeme and Milly cross the street to the hotel. The angry cowman had his daughter by the arm, scolding her fiercely as he marched her back to the hostelry. A few moments after they entered the place, Graeme reappeared on the street, stiff and angry, strode to his Ace High Saloon.

Now Cole glanced both ways along the street, still somewhat somnolent because of the absence of the townsmen on posse duty, and moved to the Ace High. Inside, a swamper had a fire going in a small flat top stove at the rear end of the back-bar and was washing soiled glassware. He flung up his head as Cole entered. "No bartender," he volunteered, as Cole looked around. "Not even open fer business."

Cole smiled, pointed at a rear door marked "OFFICE." The swamper nodded and watched him head back and step into Bill Graeme's sanctum. Cole closed the door. Graeme, sitting behind a table, lifted his head from a litter of papers. A momentary flash came to his eyes—call it fear, surprise, warning. Whatever it was, it faded swiftly, leaving him chill, dead-eyed, fully master of himself.

"Missed you last night, Cole," he said, conversationally. "Glad you called. Sit

down and rest awhile. Have a cigar."

"No thanks, Bill" Cole stood planted. "Can't stay. With your stooges out after me, I thought it a good time to look in on you."

Graeme snapped off the tip of a cigar, and lit it. "I take that remark unkindly, Cole. Why are you here? What do you want?"

"You cremate my dad in the ashes of my home," Cole said, tautly. "You watch me packed out of here, bound for seven years of hell with a Pool bullet in my spine. And then you have the gall to ask what I want. I've come back to smash you, Bill. You and John Tuxbry and your fancy killer, Stallion Stallings."

In the drawn silence, the rasp of Cole's thumbnail against the looped shells in his belt was like a hissed warning. Graeme's short laugh cut into the suggestive sibilance. It was not a convincing laugh and there was no humor in his eyes. He marvelled that this bold, nerveless warrior could be the wrecked boy who had left Felicity seven years before.

"Only a fool talks wild and loose, Cole," he said. "After all, you are only one man. No matter how deep your hate runs, it can't make you any wider across the britches. Better let sleeping dogs lie. The past buries its mistakes and its dead. Only an undertaker digs up old graves."

"And the undertaker gets the man who thinks he's unbeatable, Bill."

The Mitten boss winced and his nerve broke—a little. "What do you want?" he repeated. "Are you threatening me? Did you come here to murder me like you did those three—" He hesitated, some faint spark of decency gnawing his conscience.

Cole laughed, tauntingly. "No sale, Bill. I saw your signal to Stallion. That was what sent those boys out to die. I think too much of Lasso Linden to see him gutted like a fish. You underestimated him. Don't make the same mistake with me."

"What do you want?" cried Graeme. "For God's sake, come to the point."

"Want?" Cole hadn't hoped the man would crack so soon, so easily. "I want all the return you can make for that night at the Broken Arrow."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You've got me confused."

"Don't lie, Bill. You can't bring my dad back to this life. You can't restore the lost years. So, no matter what you do, you can make only partial payment and I'm here to see that it's a substantial one. Turn your interests over to me. Get out of Happy Valley, bag and baggage. For ten years, I'll send you half the profits, then it's all mine—over your signature. You can do that or—"

"Or what?"

"Or fight me and lose it all, including your life."

Judging from the change in Graeme's face, Cole realized the man had been afraid of something less tangible than this. This was a deal and he was a hard trader. It bucked him up. His lips curled scornfully. "You think you can make that stick?" He laughed a full throated taunt. "Who the hell do you think you are? The gall of a damned bum coming here and black-jacking me out of what I've built up, and my father before me. I'll compromise with you, Cole. I'll deed you three-by-six on the Mitten, and then bury you on it."

Cole's eyes bored him. "Then it's war, Bill?"

"To a plumb finish, you bet. I'm warring now with one human skunk. I may as well take on another."

"You better think of Milly, Bill."

Graeme started, searching Cole's eyes. "You mean you'll fight her too?"

"She's tarred with your brush, Bill. She's bound to get hurt bad when you lose."

"Who says he's gonna lose?" The heavy voice, immediately behind Cole, sent ice along his spine. The door closed with a bang. "Turn around, Danvers—drawing!"

Taken completely by surprise, Cole glanced across his shoulder at Stallion Stallings. The burly killer had entered with the silence of the furtive mountain cat, stood now on spread legs, gun leveled, an unholy smile of triumph on his raw-boned face. His *chino* eyes were narrowed to slits and behind them lay a steady glitter.

"Say the word, Bill, an' I'll pour it to him."

Cole's eyes came back to Graeme, who had whipped a gun from the holster under his coat skirt. The threat of death hung like a heavy effluvia in the small room.

Cole knew that, until he died, he would never be closer to the grave. He watched the muscles ripple along the cowman's face, held his breath until he said:

"None of that, Stallion. In spite of the enormity of his crimes, he deserves a fair trial and a legal hanging. Holster your gun."

Stallion snorted. "More fool playing with fire, Bill. Enormity of his crimes; you don't know the half of it. While we chased around after Danvers last night, he slips out with a gang of what you call *poor nesters*." He emphasized the words with spiteful mockery, "rides to the Bar Boot. Five of John Tuxbry's men lie dead out yonder. The buildings are burned to the sills. The Lord knows what's become of John."

"You're a liar!" said Cole, recklessly.

Stallion laughed and Bill Graeme's spirits lifted magically. "Good Lord," he breathed. "What a break. Danvers, while no decent man can condone your action, I'll confess you've been of service to me. The least I can do is to put you where vengeful John Tuxbry can't get at you. Stallion, take him to jail."

Stallion obeyed promptly, lifting Cole's gun from its holster and jabbing the muzzle into Cole's kidney. "It's a crazy notion, Bill," he rapped, "but you're the doctor. You heard him, Danvers. March!"

He whipped the door open, prodded Cole the length of the barroom and outside. Cole was grateful for the empty walks as he was herded down the street and into the little stone jailhouse. Stallion's keys unlocked the place, and the middle of three cells inside. He shoved Cole in, slammed and locked the barred door.

"Them as love the Bar Boot," he smirked, "will be sweatin' to pay you off fer last night's work, Danvers. It may strain us some to keep 'em outa here." Laughing softly, he walked out. Cole heard the door slam and the man's footsteps recede along the walk.

Unbearably depressed, Cole felt of the bars and the sweating walls. They were sound and stout, and he fell to pacing, back and forth, like a caged cat. He had made a bad mistake in going to Graeme with his fool brags. Tomorrow was Sunday. If the nesters responded to his call, Turkey Roost—a natural amphitheatre in

the hills behind the Broken Arrow—would throng with them. They would wait in vain for him, damn him for letting them down and depart for their homes, more embittered than before. The revolt against Pool tyranny would die a-borning and the doom of the small outfits would be symbolized in a public hanging. He wondered if they would venture down to see him die for a crime undoubtedly committed by Stallion himself.

TIME snailed through that seemingly endless day. There was no food at noon and Cole could not have eaten had there been any. But when the sun sank and dusk crept in, Cole chafed. Were they trying to starve him to death?

The break came around nine o'clock. The pulse of awakening Felicity was quickening and through the rising murmur of revelry came the echo of footsteps along the walk. The sounds ceased. A brief exchange of talk in the darkness. The sound of a blow. A low cry and the rasp of something dragged alongside the jail to the corral behind. Silence for several moments, and then a key rattled in the outer lock.

Cole, his heart pumping, saw a shadowy figure silhouetted briefly against the street glow, then the door had closed softly. "Danvers?"

"Who's there?"

No answer. Footsteps approaching the cells. Something rubbed whisperingly against the bars. "Here's your supper, Danvers."

Cole's questing fingers found the warm bundle wrapped in flour sacking, drew it through the bars. But now his hunger was less for food than a sating of his curiosity. "Who is it?" he asked again.

"Lasso Linden." Cole thought he detected a note of shame in the voice. "I brung your supper."

"You went to a lot of trouble, Lasso. Don't tell me they trusted you with the key after last night." He waited, listening to the man's rough breathing.

Presently, Lasso said. "I know how you figger, Danvers, an' can understand how you may think wrong. There's two sides to this Happy Valley fracas—three sides, you might say. Unless you was wise to all the angles, you might add the figgers

up an' still end with the wrong sum."

"Hogwash!" rapped Cole. "Which side you on? John Tuxbry's? After him calling you a Graeme stool pigeon an' gettin' smashed for it a few hours later? Are you a Graeme man? He gave the order to have you killed and robbed when you left the Ace High with your winnings. Which side you on, Lasso?"

"My own side," muttered the Bar L boss. "That's why I said there was three sides. What side you on?"

"Neither. I came here to smash them both, an' all they stand for. I got too chesty and now I'm in a split stick. Graeme tossed me in here for the killing of Tuxbry riders last night. John Tuxbry will be trying to take me out for a neck stretching. That should answer your question, if you needed to ask it. And it should put us both on the same side if you're telling the truth."

Lasso stood pressed against the bars, still as death. Cole could sense his struggle and was not surprised at the tremor in his voice when he spoke. "Yo're hell-an'-fell-in-it for pryin' under a man's skin, Danvers. No matter what you or any other man thinks, I'm my own man, fightin' my enemies in my own ways. Nobody can use me as a hook for his dirty trousers. As for bein' on your side, I'd shy from you like a rattler except I owe you my life. I pay my debts. I'll pay you off—"

"If you think you owe me anything, Lasso, open this cell door an' you've squared it."

Lasso grunted. "I'd do that, if I had a key. The feller I bopped was only a bum who swamps out the jail an' totes grub to the prisoners. But, until something better offers—here!" Something rang lightly against the bars and Cole felt a gun pressed into his hands. "If you're handy, this will beat a key. So long, now; I gotta be stirrin'."

"Lasso!"

The man turned on his way to the door. "Yeah? What now?"

"I left word with your wife for you to be at Turkey Roost, tomorrow midnight. I'm hoping all the boys will show up. You'll be there?"

Lasso didn't answer at once. He stood passive, as if brooding over some bitter calculation. *How he's changed*, thought

Cole, remembering him as a jovial, laughing man who made friends easily and took life at a hard gallop. There was little laughter now in the soul of this man as he said:

"Wouldn't be caught dead there, Danvers. A man makes his way as he can, an' it ain't seemly for them that take another way to sneer at him. No, I won't be there to meet holier-than-thou hypocrites. But I'll be back here; you can count on that."

He turned and went out, closing the door softly. Cole listened until he could hear nothing more of him, then verified the loads in the gift gun, stuck it in his waistband and buttoned his coat. He didn't doubt the time would come to use it, but—Had Lasso made a chance for him? Or was this Graeme's way of finishing an annoying adversary—killed while escaping from jail? He opened the lunch and ate with relish.

Chapter IV

KILLIN' AT COON TURN!

LASSO LINDEN, after locking the jail-house, went back to the corral and returned the key to the pocket of the unconscious janitor. Afterward, he followed an alley to the rear of the Ace High and came to the street, pausing in deep shadow between the saloon and an adjoining building. Posted here, he saw the posse come straggling in—twenty saddle-sore, dusty men led by the weary, frustrated Sheriff Cap Tilford. They dismounted at the hitch-bars, tied their jaded animals and filed into the Ace High for bottled solace.

Unmoving until the last of them had entered the saloon, Lasso heard the boot-steps against the walk and saw Bill Graeme pass so close he could almost touch him. Then Lasso saw something else—something that swept away the uncertainty of his future movements.

A figure stirred in the shadows, across the street and a few doors west. Lasso heard the chiming of belled spurs, saw a man fade across the thoroughfare. By the twin lights at the hotel entrance, he saw Stallion Stallings enter, his gaunt face grim and purposeful. Lasso turned back to the alley, found the rear door of the

hotel and let himself silently into a dimly lighted rear hall.

The place was quiet. Kitchen help rattled dishes to his left. Straight ahead, a low laugh and man-talk came from the lobby. On his right was the steep, narrow back staircase and Lasso cautiously climbed to the second floor. Down the corridor light struck across a threshold and Lasso made out the muted murmur of strained voices. He glided to that door and poised, listening. He heard Stallion Stallings heave a great sigh.

"Sure is soothin' to a man's soul, honey, to stretch out his feet, pillow his head an' feast his eyes on a beautiful woman."

"You have no right to come in here, Mister Stallings. If you don't get—"

"Now, don't get excited, Milly. I—"

"Miss Graeme to you, sir."

A brash laugh. "Milly, Miss Graeme, sweetheart—they're all the same an' you'll get used to whichever, comin' from me. All the same ribboned package. I've wanted you something fierce ever since I first laid eyes on you, gal, an'—"

"You're playing with fire, Mister Stallings. If I tell my father you—"

"It won't surprise him none, honey. I've already told him how I feel about you. Like me, he's a man who wants what he wants. An' he knows he hasn't a chance of gettin' it, without me. Oh, he'll buck some, an' rear back, before he says I can marry you, but that's how it's going to be. When we going to be spliced, lady?"

"Marry you?" Lasso caught the loathing in her voice. "Not in a million years. I'll kill myself first. When I tell Dad—"

"What can he do, girlie? Graeme will wear my collar or die. His mistake was thinking I'd be content with what he pays me, over what Tuxbry offered. I kill them who buck me, an' Bill's not bullet proof. If he accepts me as son-in-law or forces me to plug him, it's all the same. I'm taking over Mitten, Felicity an' Rimrock County. Be smart. Climb onto my bandwagon. Kiss me an' say you'll be mistress hereabouts."

Lasso heard his heavy tread, the girl's low cry, the smash of her hand against Stallion's cheek. Stallion laughing: "That's it, Kid. I like 'em spunky." Lasso opened the door silently, gliding toward them. Stallion's back was toward him but the

man read his danger in the girl's eyes. He spun her from him, pivoted. He didn't draw. Lasso was too close, leaping in with gun still holstered.

A blacksmith in his youth, Lasso was deceptively strong. Tall, lank, careless of his carriage, he seemed anything but physically dangerous. But beneath his weathered denims were coiled-steel muscles, fused dynamite. Those muscles uncoiled now. The dynamite exploded. Killer lust faded. Stallion fell forward, gun undrawn. Lasso caught him before he chinned the floor, lifted him easily, bore him to an open window and hurled him outside.

The echoing crash came back from that fifteen-foot fall. Dusting off his bony hands, Lasso scowled at the girl. "What ails you, eh? Why don't you lock the door?"

She seemed not to hear. Her horrified eyes were fixed on the billowing curtain. "You—you killed him."

"Sure. Did you want that I should kiss him? This game's for keeps. Go tell your dad he can't buy Lasso Linden's scalp with killer money. He's in the Ace High. Tell him I'll wait for him at Coon Turn Bridge till midnight. I want talk. If he don't come, he'll get what Stallion got. Tell him that."

"But—"

"But nothing. Get going."

He backed her into the hall, watched her run to the stairhead and vanish. Then he faded like a ghost down the rear staircase and into the dark night.

Sobbing, Milly Graeme ran to the Ace High, pausing at the doors to stare into the smoky interior. She'd never entered a saloon and the prospect petrified her. She saw the possemen lined at the bar, drinking, smoking. She heard the crass laughter, the click of poker chips. She smelled liquor.

Now she spotted her father, near the bar end, talking intently with Cap Tilford. Overcoming her reluctance, she pushed inside, ran across the sawdust.

"Dad!"

Graeme stiffened, swung to see her lose footing and sprawl. Silence attested men's respect for a good woman, surprise at seeing one in the Ace High. Bill Graeme roared:

"Baby! What you doing here?" He

darted to her side, snatched her up. "Baby!"

Milly clung, weeping. "After you left, daddy, he came in. I was so frightened. When he kissed me, that other man appeared. Stallings tried to shoot him. The man knocked him down and hurled him out the window. He killed him." She choked.

Men closed in, curiously. Bill Graeme scolded. "Hold on, baby. Who came in? Who tried to shoot who? Who got killed? Start again, real slow."

Milly's terror was passing. She started at the beginning, carefully stating the facts. Graeme's face darkened and fear came to his round eyes as she delivered Lasso's message. "You better go, dad. He was awful mad and he meant it."

Marshal Tilford plucked Graeme's sleeve. "No, Bill. Them nesters will hold you as a hostage against release of the man who started this. Cole Danvers."

Graeme nodded, staring into far distances, stroking his clipped mustache. "I trusted Stallion," he muttered, his look that of a king whose legions falter, whose empire crumbles. "He's paying me off with threats, molesting my daughter. He deserved to die. I owe Linder a debt of gratitude. Come back to the hotel, baby, and keep the door locked. You boys stay here and keep calm. Cap, fetch a lantern and meet me at the hotel, for a look at Stallion."

COMFORTING Milly, he led her to the hotel, turning back to meet lantern-swinging Tilford. They turned alongside the hotel, light lifted, searching in vain for a crumpled body. The earth, beneath the Graeme apartment, showed the imprint of a human form in the moist eave drip. And a little blood. But no Stallion.

Evidence that the Pool killer had survived shook Bill Graeme. Leaving Cap to continue the search, he dragged to the hotel lobby, sank wearily into an easy chair and lighted a cigar. It failed to soothe him. His life in Happy Valley flashed before him, pictures painted in reckless, bloody strokes.

Retracing the departed years, he faced a recurring question. Why, intent on power and strength, hadn't he found his weakness? The answer came readily

enough. He had been swayed less by the example of his stern sire than by the counsels of John Tuxbry—a greedy, nocturnal man. Tuxbry had preached for controlling Happy Valley, running out nesters, dominating politics and politicians, destroying the opposition. He had hired Stallings—a notorious gunfighter, and sent him against Cole Danvers—a rising power in the county. That raid had shocked Graeme and he found comfort now in remembering that he had opposed further killings. That rift had widened into coolness, enmity, war.

Graeme had counted *coup* against Tuxbry by enlisting Stallion. Instead, he was providing another link in the chain of his defeat. Stallion had plotted to overthrow him. Having revealed the intent, he would now desert to Tuxbry. The blow would not be long in falling. Bill Graeme saw the one redeeming facet as his control of the law. But that too, he recognized, would vanish once Tilford—an opportunist—sensed the shift of power.

The nesters! It was natural Graeme's mind should turn to them. He had abused them. They hated him. Yet. . . .

He looked at his watch. Eight o'clock! He went to the street. The town was quiet, the search for Stallings abandoned. Smiling thinly, Bill Graeme moved to the Ace High.

As he had suspected, Cap Tilford was again at the bar, mildly drunk. The man turned, watched him approach, scornful, insolent. "Gal still boogered, Bill?"

"She's all right, thanks." He extended his hand. "Keys, Cap."

"Keys? What keys?"

"To the jailhouse. I'll return them directly."

Tilford scowled. "What fer, Bill?"

"Does that matter?"

"Sure does. I got a killer cooped there an' there he stays. What you want at the jail?"

Fury clouded Graeme's big eyes. "I made you, Cap, and I can bust you. Give me the keys and quit clowning. I want to quiz Danvers about the nesters."

Fleeting manhood hardened Tilford's flabby face. "Mebby you made me, Bill, but bustin' me is somethin' else. Go ahead, try! Nobody enters that jail but me." He poured another drink with a shaky hand.

Restless laughter ran the counter. Graeme glared, remembering Cap as a bum, cadging drinks and food from saloon patrons. He had helped the man, lifted him from the gutter, and now. . . .

The drinkers were scornful, laughing. Graeme knew just how John Tuxbry would have handled this, or Stallion. Suddenly, completely, he realized how weak he was. Humiliation stifled his anger. He knew the gall of defeat. This was the revolt he had feared. Still, there was an ounce of challenge in the situation.

"You'll regret this treachery, Cap," he said, turned and went out. On the way to the livery barn, he was the same tall, straight, dominant figure and as he rigged his magnificent sorrel. *I'll make them pay*, he promised. *Every yellow-bellied son of them will sweat for this.*

He could find only the hated nesters between him and ruin. Normally, he would have deemed them hopeless but now he clutched at straws. Why would Lasso have called for a meeting unless he had something to offer? Heartened, he pushed the sorrel through the night. A half mile from Coon Turn, faint alarm invaded his deep preoccupation. He saw the dark rider push into the trail, and trembled. For a moment two men stared across the gloomy interval. Graeme spoke first:

"Who's that?"

A low, spine-tickling laugh. "That you, Graeme?"

Graeme's heart sank. He had hoped this rider was anybody but Stallion. There was no mistaking the voice. The killer had heard Lasso tell Milly to send her father to Coon Turn. Now he had made the meeting a rendezvous for three—and death.

"Stallings!" Bill Graeme screamed it, stabbing for his gun. Fire licked from the dark rider's middle. One shot. Two. Three. Bill Graeme, suddenly weak from bullet shock, dropped his weapon and clutched for the horn. His horse, mortally hit, screamed, reared and collapsed. Graeme, thrown clear, lay silent and unfeeling while his matchless sorrel kicked away its life.

Stallings rode close, peering down at the fallen man. He pointed his pistol, his bloody face convulsed with the passion for murder. Before he jerked the trigger he decided Graeme was already dead. Besides,

his head pounded cruelly and blood seeped into his eyes from a badly split scalp.

"Lie there and die," he rasped. "I'll head for the bridge an' pay off that damned nester—Lasso Linden. Then I'll lead John Tuxbry an' his men into Felicity an' take it over, lock, stock an' barrel, includin' that gal of yours. Bleed, you son of a dog. I'll get John before another sundown an' then I'll be what you both wanted to be but couldn't."

Reining about, he put spurs to his pony and galloped up the slope toward Coon Turn, missing Lasso Linden and the file of men who moved down to kneel beside Graeme.

Chapter V

DEVIL'S GUN-TROUBLE

COLE DANVERS had slept soundly on the hard jail cell cot. A sharp clap of thunder wakened him and he lay relaxed, listening to the wail of the wind, the slash of torrential rain on the roof and splash of water off the eaves. A sound, striking through the tumult of the storm, brought him up. A key rattled in the outer lock. Lantern light sent shadows dancing into the cells and Cole smiled coldly as Sheriff Tilford set a tray of food on his desk, cuffed water from his hat and shoulders and stamped mud from his boots.

"Except fer a crazy statoot that I gotta feed a prisoner twice a day, I'd uh let you rot before I'd uh bucked that rain to fetch you grub meant fer law-abidin' men. I hope you choke on it."

"Likely will," grinned Cole, "if it's as bad as the supper your jail swamper

brought me. No thanks, I don't want some."

The lawman started, stopped all action and stared between bars with hard fury frozen on his bloated face. "You're a liar," he clipped. "Pod Pesser never fetched you no supper. Somebody slugged him an' took it. You got that grub? Hmmm. Then it musta bin you that hit him."

"Not me, Cap. I'm peaceable."

"Like hell. You coulda done it, pervidin' you got holt of somethin' an' have it hid. What you got? I've a notion to come in there an' search you."

"Come on in," invited Cole.

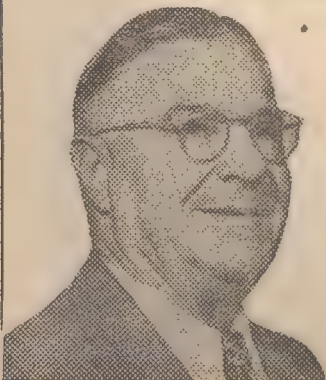
But the marshal didn't mean it. He was a canny soul when it came to his own safety. He glared speculatively, then shrugged. "Long as you've had supper, I'll leave this grub where it is. If you're here come sunup, which same I doubt, I'll feed it to yuh cold."

"Why shouldn't I be here?" asked Cole, keeping his voice level.

Tilford laughed, tartly. "If I read the signs right, you'll lose yore appetite sudden—within an hour. Uptown, the boys are talkin' lynch law."

"I've got confidence in you, Cap," taunted Cole. "The big, brave sheriff always faces the mob down, sends 'em slinkin' away with tails tucked like the coyotes they are. You're my ace in the hole, Cap."

"Like hell." The marshal laughed ironically. "You went outa here on a stretcher. Shoulda knowed when you was well off. But no, you gotta come back gunnin' for the county boss, the man who can give you cards an' spades an' shoot yore ears off. My boss. You're dangerous, better off dead. If they hit my jail, I'll back off an'



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don't worry—I'll let 'em have you!"

"That," said Cole, with a flash of temper, "is the slimy brand of courage you clawed out of the gutter, Cap. I don't blame you for hating me for pointing at Bill Graeme. He lifted you out of the cesspool, didn't he? But if Bill's so wide across the pants an' can shoot off my ears so easy, why am I so dangerous to him?"

"To hell with Bill Graeme!" Cap hissed it. "I'm talkin' about John Tuxbry." Bleary eyes glistened. "Tuxbry, the man on horseback. Brain like a whiplash. A man whose word is better'n a bond. The people's friend. His word's law from here out an' I carry out his orders."

"He's ordered me lynched—is that it?"

"I didn't say that," retorted Cap, hotly. "I—" He paused as some sound struck in from outside. The door opened a little and, as Tilford dropped his hand to his gun, a pale, frightened face peered in. Milly Graeme was drenched, her hair streaming water, her dress clinging soddenly to her lithe figure as she stepped in, closing the door behind her.

Her glance flicked, bird-like, to Cole, then to Tilford, who growled: "Miss Graeme! What the devil you doin' here?"

The girl's manner stiffened. "Mister Tilford, I think you should be told what is going on. I've heard men talking. They plan to rush the jail and hang Mister Danvers. They've been drinking and—"

"An' you want I should fight 'em, single-handed, is that it?"

"Maybe you can't do that," she conceded, "but there's no good reason why they shouldn't find an empty jail. Put Cole—Mister Danvers—on a horse, take him out to the Mitten. Lock him up there where you'll have the Mitten bunkhouse boys to back your fight if they come after your prisoner."

Cap scowled. "Why you so interested in a man who's here to murder yore dad?"

She glanced again at Cole and faint spots of color touched her pallid cheeks. Gulping, she said: "Men are not hanged for what they plan to do, marshal. If Cole is guilty of killing Mitten men, as some claim, he should have a fair trial, in court. Hurry now. Time is running out. Those men will soon be here."

"No." said Cap, doggedly. "He stays here. A sheriff don't move his prisoners

around like chessmen, just because some fool gal gits scairt of a lynchin'. Now go on back to yore hotel room an' let me run the sheriffin' here. Scat."

He waved her out and as she backed to the door she glanced again at Cole. He thought he caught some vague message in her eyes and called out. "Don't worry about me, Milly. I'll be all right, with a *brave* lawman like Cap guarding me. Thanks for coming, anyway. G'night."

HER "Good night, Cole" was faint, half blotted out by the storm sounds coming through the opened doorway. When she was gone, Tilford's belly shook with laughter and there was scorn for Cole in his eyes. "Cole Danvers, the gay blade. Playin' solid with Milly Graeme while you watch yore chance to kill her dad. Some Don Juan."

Cole glowered. "You'll burn for that, Tilford."

Again the marshal laughed, the sound dying in his throat as the door smashed open, letting in a gust of rain and the broken caricature of a man who slammed the panel behind him. He was bent at the waist. Soaked and disheveled, his hair runneled streams down a face smeared with earth and blood. Bleeding from his middle saturated his pant legs and he reeled dizzily as he paused before Cap Tilford, a pistol steady, purposeful, in his hand.

It was hard to recognize tall, dominant Bill Graeme in this human wreck, but Cap Tilford did. He recoiled a step, his lips making the silent word: "Bill!"

"Open that cell, Cap." It was a wheeze, rather than the strong voice of a strong man. "Let him out!"

"No, Bill!" Tilford cried it. "They'll kill me if—"

"Open it, you mangy dog. I sent Milly here to make sure you're part of the conspiracy to hang this boy. Your precious Stallion has shot me to death, but I made it here in time. Open that cell and make such excuses as you can to the rats you've taken up with. Hurry!"

"But, Bill, I dissent, I tell you. Listen to me, Bill—"

Graeme's gun spat fire. Cap Tilford fell with a despairing cry, his career of debauchery and fawning patronage ended. It was as surely an execution as that being

planned that minute in Felicity saloons, but it left the wreck that had been Bill Graeme unmoved. He tottered to the marshal's side, knelt and drew the keys from the dead man's pocket. Holding it, he seemed to listen. A clap of thunder had drowned the gun report. No alarm came through the clamor of the elements.

Now Bill Graeme tried to rise and failed, falling onto his face. Shaking his head like a stricken grizzly, he struggled to crawl to Cole's cell door. This also was beyond his strength. Moaning a little, he peered at Cole. "Here. Catch." He tossed the ring, which fell limply over his finger tips to the floor. Graeme covered them with his body as he fell forward in a dead faint.

Cole thrust his leg between bars, trying to hook the ring out from under the still Mitten boss. It was too far. Irony—deadly irony. Freedom almost in his grasp yet far, far away. He drew back his foot, breathing hard, desperate. The door was slowly opening and Cole half drew Lasso's gift gun, thinking of the lynchers. Instead, it was Lasso himself, wet, muddy, face drawn with weariness. He entered, staring stupidly at the fallen, bleeding men. "What the hell, Cole? You kill 'em?"

"Key's under Graeme, Lasso. Get it, quick!"

"Graeme!" Lasso gasped it, darting to the unmoving Mitten boss. "I left him at the hotel. How—?" He came up with the key ring, leaped to the door, trying several keys before the cell door swung open. Cole pushed past him, reaching for his hand.

"Thanks, Lasso. The rope was slowly throttling me. Let's get outa here."

Lasso said: "I know. Stallion's stirring them up. They're only waiting for Tuxbry an' his gun riders. What happened here?"

Cole told him, swiftly. As he talked, Graeme groaned, struggled and sat up. Lasso answered the puzzlement in Cole's face. "Stallion shot him, this side of the Coon Turn Bridge. I saw it happen, but I was too far off. Stallion was gunning for me, I reckon, an' met Graeme coming to make wau-wau. Parker Hale, Pete Machado an' Max Senn come past an' I braced 'em to rouse the boys for tonight in Felicity instead of tomorrow night at Turkey Roost. They listened, treated me like

a white man." Wonder edged the man's voice. "They'll all be here directly, Cole. Happy Valley nesters goin' to war!"

His message struck into Graeme's shocked senses. He turned up a grin, jerked his head. Cole knelt. "I come to let you out, Cole," Graeme whispered. "Too weak. I'm finished by Stallion, but not scairt to die. Look after Milly, boy, an' keep that devil away from her till she's safely out of Happy Valley."

"They're coming!" Lasso rapped it. "Time to get scarce, Cole."

"Give me a hand with Graeme, Lasso."

"No," vetoed the Mitten boss. "I'll only hinder you."

Cole ventured one look out the door. Through curtaining rain he could see the flash of lanterns, the rhythmical swinging of the lynchers' legs as they slogged along the muddy street. And he could hear their bawdy chant. . . .

"Hang Cole Danvers to the cotton-wood tree,

String the killer up for all good folks to see,

Hang Cole Danvers. . . ."

Cole slammed the door, barred it. "Out back!" he snapped. Together, they filed out the rear, whisking rubber-legged Bill Graeme around the corral and up the alley.

"To the stable," husked Lasso. "My brute's saddled there an' it won't take a minute to rig a couple more. You take him to the Mitten. I'll see what's delayin' the boys."

They halted behind the barn, listening as the chanters passed along the street. When he could be heard, Cole said: "You stay with him here. I'm going for Milly."

"Don't play fool," scolded the Box L man. "She's safe enough there an—"

"With Stallion loose? Saddle up. I'll be right back." He sprinted away. From the jailhouse came a high yell, the smash of a falling door, then a dismayed roar that ended in Stallion's heavy plaint.

"Cheated, boys! Somehow, Cole killed poor Cap an' got out. He can't be far off. Scatter out. Watch the stable. Search the hotel. Look, here comes Bar Boot. We'll run that coyote to hole an' skin."

His promise was drowned in rattling hoof echoes, wild wolf yelps and sixguns blasting the sky. Between two buildings, Cole glimpsed the rush of horsemen, heard

Stallion's order that turned them hotelward to "fetch out that high-toned Mitten filly." Cole, knowing they had turned, tried to be first at the hotel rear. But as he eased into the back hall, he heard them alighting, raking the floors with their spurs and flinging questions at an inarticulate clerk as they rushed up the staircase.

Never pausing, Cole moved along the black hall. He was afraid—for Milly. Suddenly he knew that of all the principles and factors in this many-sided trouble, she was all that mattered to him now. He loved her, and he despaired for her.

Now he carefully opened the door, looked into the lobby. It was apparently deserted, even the clerk having quitted his post. Cole stepped into the room, halting with icy warning chasing along his spine. Something drew his glance. On the staircase landing, halfway up, a man stood looking at him, a shadowy figure difficult to demark against the gloomy background.

THE FACE of John Tuxbry emerged from that shadow, as pinched and dry and nerveless as Cole remembered it. The man's cynical voice fell. "Couldn't stay away, eh Danvers? Had to come back and stick in your bill?"

"A bill long unpaid." Cole twisted the meaning, knowing showdown was a few bitter words away. "Only guilty conscience resents a just dun."

"Conscience!" Tuxbry snorted. "That's for weaklings like you. Your luck held once. It can't again. You threw your chance away."

"You'll have to prove your rep as a prophet, Tuxbry. Deal 'em out."

Felicity seemed to hold its breath. Cole heard Milly Graeme defying the man's riders, on the second floor. Tuxbry's voice dripped confidence.

"Cards, Danvers?"

"You act like I'm a frightened boy to be shot down."

"Oh, no." Sneeringly. "You're a bold fighter heeled for war. That's good."

"Bullets from the dark and a burned home cry for payment, Tuxbry. You're fighting your guilt as well as me. Draw when you're ready."

"I'll let you sweat some." Cole saw Tuxbry's outlines grow sharper as he swayed. Like a man disembodied, Cole felt him-

self duck and reach. Pistol flame gushed at him, the bullet brushing his hair. Surprise flooded Tuxbry's drawn face, in the knowledge he had missed, and Cole had no sense of aiming and jerking the trigger. He was listening to Milly's screams and the sudden bucking of his gun startled him.

The roar of Cole's weapon shuddered the room. Torn with desperation, Tuxbry whirled to mount the stairs, slipped to his knees, twisted to throw two reckless, unaimed shots and fell backward, clumping down the steps until he lay unmoving at their foot. He moaned once and ceased to moan, with a suggestive rattling that spells the approach of death gushing up into his throat.

From the second floor came wild swearing. Boots pounded the upper hall and men came tumbling down. Cole turned back, retracing his steps to the rear. As he let himself out, Lasso came up, struggling to support helpless Bill Graeme. "They're in the barn, Cole. We're euchered. Better fort up in here. Where's Pete an' Max an' the rest?"

Cole didn't answer. His ears were reaching out. Hearing men reach the alley behind the stable, he caught Graeme's arm. "Quick!" he snapped, and helped Lasso get the Mitten boss inside. Up the back stairs they went, with Tuxbry's irate gunnies smashing into the rear hall below like angry hornets. Carefully, Cole stuck his head above the second floor. There were only two men in the hallway, dragging the struggling girl toward the front stairhead. Cole called: "Wait!" One man turned, throwing his gun. Cole shot him in the belly.

The second man ducked as his mate fell, drawing the girl against him as he turned. It was risky, but Cole sent his bullet into the man's face as the fighting girl tore loose and went to the floor.

Locked in the Graeme apartment, Cole and Lasso, Milly and her father listened to the rumble of talk outside as Tuxbry men warily kept away from the door and discussed ways and means of dislodging their quarry. They had passed the word to the street and loudly Stallion was marshaling his sharpshooters, posting them at vantage points from which they could rake the Graeme apartment with lead.

Cole put Milly onto the floor and took

position at one of the windows. Nearby Bill Graeme sat at a sill, fighting it out with blazing pistol. In an adjoining room Lasso kept up a running fire. The men in the hall were riddling the door with bullets, splintering it to wreckage. Cole shifted position in order to speak them back.

Minutes passed, everyone in that room engrossed in his own problems. Presently, Cole heard Milly cry out. She had wetted a towel at the washstand and had crawled to attend her sire's wounds when a slug crossed the sill and took him squarely in the forehead. It killed him instantly and Milly pillowed her head on his silent chest, weeping terribly. Cole went to her, drew her away, soothing her by brushing her hair back from her forehead.

"Don't cry, honey. Bill died as he knew long ago he must—fighting those who would have torn him down. Tears can't bring him back, but a smile can help us beat back those who killed him. We'll have help directly."

She tried bravely, smiling through her tears. "I'm not crying for him, Cole. As you say, he knew he might die any time. I'm crying for you—your bloody homecoming. Happiness is dead in me if—if they kill you."

It struck a live chord of humor in him. "That sounds funny, coming from a Graeme to a Danvers, Milly. But it's sweet to me. I'll remind you of it, afterward."

"Pray God you're able," she murmured, and buried her face on her arm.

From the other room came Lasso's yell. Cole hurried to join him. Felicity echoed to the roar and smash of pounding hoofs and blasting guns. With Lasso pounding his shoulders in delight, Cole saw the mounted nesters sweep down the main street and into battle, dismounting, loosing

their ponies, advancing from his sight.

Burning their bridges. . . . Prepared to fight it out to the death. . . . Pete Machado and stolid Max Senn leading the way with blaring guns. . . . Parker Hale, Howie Pollet and Farley Kent deploying behind them. . . . Henry DeMond and his two burly sons. . . . Elisha Ring, Acey Starr and the Udell boys. . . . Reckless, brawling, irresistible nesters, drawn from their hidden ranches by the call of one forgotten, driven by hate to cleanse Happy Valley for their children. . . . For themselves.

The pitch of battle swelled to a bedlam, filling the hall-bound Tuxbry men with alarm. They were withdrawing now by the rear staircase and Cole hurried them along with snapshots through the slivered door. A call from Milly sent him into the rear room of the apartment. She pointed to a window overlooking the alley, whispering a name: "Stallings!" Fear dilated her pupils. "I heard him planning to get behind the nesters and—and to fire the hotel."

Cole looked across the sill. Stallion stood below, a score of armed followers awaiting his orders. These he ignored as he instructed two townsmen in arson, to spread confusion to the enemy. One rebelled. "I'll go a long way to please you, Stallion, but this is too far a reach—burnin' winmen!"

Like a cougar, Stallion leaped at him. His gun arced up, down, smashing the protester's skull. He fell like a gunned beef. Cole called: "Stallion!" The killer and all his men looked up but it was Stallion, swifter to act and react, who bawled a curse and flung up his weapon. His highboned, leathery face was a contorted picture of evil. His slanted, slaty eyes blazed murder. Cole gave him not a whit more chance than

(Continued on page 127)

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of Big Book Western Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1947. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Big Book Western Magazine, and that the following is to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of October, 1947. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 363-W-8. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Rev. 7-46.

RETURN of the HELLTOWN GUN-GHOST . . . By RICHARD BRISTER

THIS HOOPER hadn't been in the diggings more than a couple hours before we'd begun to get his number. He came a-swaggering into the Showdown with his chest thrown out in front of him like a chicken that just laid a round dozen

of solid gold eggs. He thumped his big red fist on the bar, demanding a double shot of hundred-proof whiskey.

Now it just so happened that Stump Carpenny was having himself a beer with a couple of corduroy-coated miners, and when

Stump pinned the bright law badge onto Hooper's vest. Everybody started drinking—heavily. . . .



Harry Hooper had burned down an owlhoot renegade to win himself the sheriff's star in hot-hate Helltown . . . and yet there loomed the grisly returned gun-ghost, shooting at him with damn' unghostly bullets, using a damn' unheavenly sixgun. . . .

this Hooper banged his fist down on the bar—which was pretty much makeshift—Stump's glass gave a jump and a good finger of that beer sloshed over his wrist.

Stump swung on this big, moon-faced Hooper like a shot.

"Just what in blue blazes," he snarls, "do you think you're up to, Shorty?"

The rest of us was reading the warning signals already, and we commenced to creep back out of harm's way and give Stump plenty of room. Stump, he ain't just like the average gunfighter. Having one arm off clean to the elbow—which I hear tell he lost it under the wheels of a fast-moving train while he was riding to hold up same—he generally figures to get the jump on the other fellow in going for his hardware.

He's a real mean critter, Stump Car-penny. It ain't rightly known how many men he's took care of with that big pearl-handled .45 he totes down against his lean left hip. But it's a mighty high number, and for a fact, it's said Stump himself has lost count of the tally.

Thing about Stump is, when he lost that left arm, it was like a lot of the skill and speed he'd had there was transferred over to his right side. He got just that much faster in the hand he had left, like Nature was trying to make up for his disadvantage.

Stump, he owns the Showdown, and being the number one gunslick in the diggings, he can make pretty near anybody jump through hoops whenever he cares to. And he cares to plenty. It's as if he's kind of soured inside, on account of losing that arm underneath of them train wheels, and means to make the rest of the world pay up for that to him.

He's a queer one, Stump is. Sometimes he'll shoot a man down just as calm as you please, appearing like nothing makes him as happy as killing. And the next thing you know, he'll be taking part in a big josh at somebody. Old Doc Rainsock, who has a strain of Cherokee in him and is generally in the Showdown drinking, says it's reasonable enough for Stump to enjoy laughing at people.

"Don't nobody let it get back to him I said this," Doc tells us one afternoon after drinking more than he should of, "but the reason Stump likes to get up these joshes and turn a laugh on people is account of losing his arm."

"Meaning how, Doc?" somebody says.

"Meaning," says Doc, lipping some, but acting very important, "that for all his swagger and chesty carryings-on, Stump is a mighty self-conscious man inside, of him. He feels kind of awkward on account of that arm, which he shouldn't, because Lord knows nobody else is worrying about it as much as he is. Nevertheless he figures people are looking at him, secretly laughing at him. And that," pronounces the doc, "is why he gets such a boot out of turning a laugh or two onto somebody else."

Doc is a mighty shrewd man, for all of his drinking, and I reckon he give us something to think of. But right now, as he swung around from the bar and snarled at this big, red-faced Hooper, Stump himself was giving us more to think of.

"Say something, Shorty," he snaps at the pilgrim.

This Hooper is a big beefy-faced gent, standing about six-foot-two, and with a lot of unhealthy-looking meat hanging onto him. Stump's calling him "Shorty," of course, is strictly for laughs. But the rest of us are too busy trying to figure how soon Stump will go for his gun to get any humor out of the situation.

The pilgrim has a wood-handled sixgun hanging down off his belt in a ratty old holster, but he is such a big, clumsy-looking gazabo that none of us figures he has a chance in China in a shootout with Stump.

It is a funny thing about this Hooper, though. He don't scare. He don't knuckle down and say "Uncle" in front of Stump's ugly scowl like the average pilgrim. His moist, light blue eyes stare right back at Stump's slitted black ones, and he says, "I don't bluff down, mister, if that's what you're thinkin'."

Now, nine times out of ten, when a stranger tries talking up to Stump like this, he is as good as writing out his own death warrant. But what saves this Hooper is his voice. When he thumped on the bar and asked for his whiskey, he'd spoke deep in his throat, like a man ought to. This time, though, he seemed to of lost control of his Adam's apple. It bobbed up in his mouth, and give his voice trouble to get past, and his voice came out high and squeaky, just like a woman's.

Stump's hand is slapping down to his gun, and he is on the point of pulling his

hardware and plugging this pilgrim. Then, all of a sudden, he changes his mind. He cracks his palm down on one leg, bending over, and laughing. This breaks the tension, and the next thing you know, all of us are laughing along with him, while Hooper stands there, kind of helpless-like, glaring around at us.

"What's so side-splittin'?" he demands, still in that high voice of his.

Stump gives a guffaw and slaps him hard on the back. "Boy," he says, "maybe you don't know whose bluff you been callin'. I'm Stump Carpenny. Likely you heard of my gun reputation."

"I have," says the pilgrim, still speaking through the top of his head. "You don't scare me any, Carpenny."

It is comical, the way he says it. "Ho!" gurgles Stump. He is having himself a high old time, as he squints, wet-eyed from laughter, at the pilgrim. "Son," he says, "cut it out. You're like to kill me."

"Daggone tootin' I am," snaps this Hooper, "if you don't cut out that laughin', Carpenny."

He sure ain't scaring any. It is easy to see he is just too dumb to know any better. Any fool except him would of looked at them notches in Stump's gun, would of read danger signs in Stump's ugly black eyes, but this Hooper didn't know what fear was.

"That goes for the rest of you," he pipes at us, glaring around the room. "I ain't a man to be laughed at."

Stump gives the rest of us a big wink, and then goes very dead-panned towards the pilgrim. Stump is on a josh now, it is plain to see from his manner.

"Son," he says, "what's your name?"

"Hooper."

"Um," says Stump. "Don't know as I've heard of any gunswift Hoopers. I reckon you got a first name."

"Harry," says Hooper.

"Harry Hooper," muses Stump, still holding a deadpan. "Nope," he says, "I can't place you. There was a Three-Finger Jack Hooper operating down in Tombstone a ways back, but I understand he was caught cheatin' at cards and they sent his guns home to his daddy. You ain't by any chance the same family?" He looks at Harry Hooper's wood-handled gun in the ratty old holster. "I reckon you know how to use that thunder iron?"

This Hooper throws his chest out a little. "Chances are," he says, "I could give you a lesson, Carpenny."

Stump grins at him, very casual. "Such as?"

Hooper goes a-swaggering out to the street, carrying his excess weight kind of clumsy, and pulling that old wood-handled gun out of his holster as he goes.

There is an empty tin can laying in the gutter, about ten yards up Prescott Street. Hooper draws a careful bead onto it, screws his face up like he has a bellyache, and pulls trigger. He misses by a good foot and a half, going low into the dust. But his luck is good. His slug ricochets up and drives the can into the boardwalk.

He grins at Stump, real cocky, as if to say, "Take it from there, mister."

Now, it is a well known fact to everyone in the diggings except this crazy Hooper that Stump draws like lightning and never misses what he aims at. Stump is enjoying himself, however, and takes the way that promises to provide the most laughs at this Hooper's expense.

He yanks his gun out, slow as molasses for him, takes careful aim, and plunks a slug in the dust a foot past the tin can. "Why, ding bust it!" he says to Hooper. "I guess I ain't quite in it with you, Hooper."

"Shootin' a pistol," squeaks Hooper, "ain't a thing to be learnt overnight. Takes practice."

Saying which, he holsters his gun, and goes a-lumbering up the street, his shoulders thrown back, his chest sticking out more than ever, leaving us all bent over holding onto our bellies, giggling and cackling like a penful of chickens. Stump is doing the hardest guffawing.

"Come on inside, boys," he says, still sputtering. "Drinks on the house. We're going to get a lot of laughs out of that pilgrim."

Old Doc Rainsock passes his free drink over to me, while Stump ain't looking. Doc looks very gloomy, I notice, and I whisper at him, "What's the matter?"

"Stump is going to play with that Hooper," says Doc, in a low voice, "like a cat with a mouse. When he's got his fun out of him, he'll kill him. You know that. I like my liquor, but I ain't thirsty enough to drink to that prospect."

OLD DOC sure'd called the turn on that Stump. I guess you'd say Stump was pretty near king in our diggings. There wasn't more than two hundred and fifty people in camp, all told. Cy Openhammer's Dry Goods and Stump's Showdown Saloon was the only two decent wood buildings in camp. The rest was tents, shacks, shanties, and dugout arrangements. The only real friend a man had was the gold dust in his poke, and the only law was what he carried around in his holster.

Stump had the quickest gunhand—and the straightest-shooting—in camp, the steadiest nerve, and the least troublesome conscience when it come to killing for what he wanted. That made him top dog, and when he took the notion into his head to turn a few laughs out of this pilgrim, Harry Hooper, why the rest of the diggings just naturally went along with him on it, figuring there wasn't no percentage in crossing Stump Carpenney.

"The way I figure," says Stump, "there's a bellyful of laughs in this Hooper. Only we got to dig some to get at 'em. Now," he says, "I got me a plan figured out. And I will personally make a sieve out of the man that spills the beans to the pilgrim."

Well, sir, Hooper hadn't been in the diggings more than a day or so than his time come. It come on a Sunday. First off, Stump and the boys that generally hangs in the Showdown invite Hooper in for a Sunday afternoon liquoring party. They make him give up his gun at the door, and hang it up on a wall peg.

"I don't hold with gunplay on a Sunday," explains Stump. "Nobody wears a gun in my place today. That's a house ruling, Hooper."

"Suits me," says Hooper, "as long as everyone else has to do it."

What he don't see, of course, is what happens to his gun after he hangs it up on that wall peg. Whilst Hooper is a-bellying up to Stump's bar and wetting his tonsils, little Danny Inglehart, on Stump's instructions, grabs the pilgrim's gun, takes the cartridges out of it, and reloads it with blanks. Pretty near everybody in the place is watching Danny, and trying hard not to giggle and spoil the josh. Hooper, though, he's up there with his foot on the bar rail, drinking Stump's whiskey and acting cocky, as usual.

"You say," Stump is chuckling, "you had sixteen gunfights, eh, Hooper? Whereabouts was these showdown battles?"

"Here and there," says Hooper. "Tombstone. Abilene. Sioux City. Dodge. I'm the kind of man likes to keep movin', Carpenney."

"These here gun battles, now," says Stump. "I take it you didn't get in no trouble. You didn't have no trouble knockin' the other fellow off his feet, eh, Hooper?"

There is a big crowd collecting around Stump and the pilgrim, pretending to hang on every word Hooper says. Harry Hooper tries not to let his audience down with a dull performance.

"Fact is," he says, "I did have some trouble. Fought a man down in Dodge, over a honkytonk girl. Dang if he didn't throw a sneak shot at me, before we'd even quit jawing. Put a slug in my belly where you can still hear her rattle. But I gave him one twixt the eyes before the pain bent me double."

"Well, good for you," says Stump, and his black eyes turn craftly. "Don't s'pose you'd demonstrate that there rattle."

"Sure," says Hooper, and grabbing hold of the top of the bar, he starts to contract and expand his stomach muscles. Stump goes kind of green. That slug Hooper was bragging about is rolling around inside of him, sure enough, and making a sound almost like dice in a box.

"Tough, ain't you?" says Stump, kind of peevish, and gives a quick little wink towards Danny Inglehart. "What was the name of that feller?" he asks the pilgrim.

"Kane," says Hooper. "Roy Kane," and then goes stiff and straight, all of a sudden, as the whole room, on Stump's signal, goes dead quiet. "Why?" says Hooper, in that high, girlish voice of his. "What about it?"

His answer comes from Danny Ingelhart. "I'll tell you what about it," grits Danny. "Roy Kane was my brother."

Hooper gapes at him. "Why," he says, "quit talkin' silly. If your name is Inglehart, how could—"

Stump grabs a hold of him then and draws off to one side. "Listen," he coaches Hooper, "you're in deep water. Danny Inglehart is one tough gun-slinging hombre. He ain't exactly lived a model life for himself, and there's a price onto his head in

quite some few counties. His name," says Stump, real serious, "was Homer Kane to begin with."

"He don't scare me none," says that crazy Hooper, and that high voice of his carries right back to Danny.

"Come out in the street and we'll talk it over with guns," Danny snaps at him, real brittle.

Well, sir, Stump and the boys play it up, and the next thing Hooper knows, he is out in the middle of Prescott Street, facing Danny Ingelhart for a showdown gun battle. Stump runs the whole shebang. He goes out and hands them their shooting irons, and the minute they have the guns strapped on, Stump starts talking at them.

"All right," he says. "Get your hands up and away from them hawlegs. I'm a-going to count on you, boys, and we'll keep this thing honest. When I get to three, you can grab iron. Savvy?"

They both nod, never taking their eyes off of each other. Naturally, the lot of us are watching the pilgrim. And to tell you the truth, for all of his blowing, he handles himself pretty good in the showdown. He ain't trembling, like you might expect, and there is something kind of pathetic about the way he leans on Stump's instructions, him never knowing the sting has been drawn out of his sixshooter.

"One," says Stump. "Two." And then he pauses, meaning to make Hooper nervous. The time stretches out for a couple of seconds, and Hooper is standing there, tense as a cat, and then Stump throws that "Three" at them.

Hooper is tied up in a half dozen knots. The way he grabs for that old wood-handled sixgun you'd think it was glued down in the ratty, frayed holster. Danny makes his draw smooth as glass, and punches a shot out at Hooper. Then Hooper's gun finally blazes and just like that, it is all over.

Danny Ingelhart lets out a groan, claps his hand to his chest, and crumbles into the dust of the street. Right away, on cue, a bunch of the boys cluster around him. Stump and some of the others, meanwhile, grab hold of Hooper and rush him into the Showdown for a drink to celebrate the liquidation, as Stump says, "of these diggings' worst gunslick." Stump hangs Hooper's gun back on the wall peg.

"I KNOWN you had him, son," says Stump, laying a hand on Hooper's broad back, "the minute he threw away that first shot at you. You was real smart, holdin' back like you done. Took your time, cool as ice, and plugged him clean through the heart. Drink up, Hooper," says Stump, "you're my idea of a real gunman."

"Who's goin' to take care of the body?" says Hooper, and pulls out some money. He don't see one of Hunk's boys fixing his gun like it should be.

"Why," says Stump, peeling a ten dollar bill off of Hooper's roll, "don't give a thought to it. Doc Rainsock'll take care of that part. I'll give him this ten dollars for his trouble. We got our own little Boothill. Listen, now, Hooper, wasn't you maybe a little unnerved outside there? I mean, it don't seem hardly human, a man to stand up against a killer like Dan as cool-lookin' as you did."

Hooper's chest is coming up like a pigeon's. "Shush," he says. "What's to be scared of? I've took care of worse hombres than that before breakfast."

Well, as you can imagine, this sort of thing is good for a lot of laughs, although we have to be all-fired careful not to let Hooper catch on we are laughing at him. This is not as hard as you'd think, as we know Stump will plug any man who spoils his josh for him. And Hooper being kind of slow-witted, it is not hard to fool him.

"Cat with a mouse," Doc Rainsock mutters into his whiskey glass. "I tell you, it galls a man, having to stand idly by and see a fool like that Hooper march to his doom. Why, I'm even guilty of complicity in this. Hooper thinks I buried Dan Ingelhart, whereas everyone else in camp knows Dan's having a fine time up the river at Guilder's Landing."

"Why don't you tell the pilgrim the truth," some of us ask Doc, "if it's such a weight on your conscience?"

"What," gasps Doc, "and get myself killed?"

"Stump ain't that blood-thirsty, Doc."

"Oh, no?" says Doc. "You boys don't know. You boys weren't here when these diggings were just getting started, that's your trouble. You figure a man who goes in for a josh like Stump does, can't be all bad. There's were you're wrong. You

weren't here to watch Stump takes these diggings over."

"What about it?"

"What about it?" says Doc. "What about the three Swede laborers that drifted in and went to work digging a well for Stump? Maybe you boys haven't heard how Stump shot those three down in cold blood, when the job was finished, rather than pay them."

"We heard it. We also heard he was drunk."

"Or the time," goes on Doc, none too sober his ownself," Stump caught Joe Freeland stealing silver out of the Saturday till. Stump knocked Freeland out with the butt of his gun, then hauled him out back, and chopped the fingers off of both his hands. Joe's hands finally healed up, but there wasn't much he could do in the way of earning a living, without the use of his fingers. He finally threw himself in the river. You boys call that funny?"

"Someday, Doc," says a furry soft voice, somewhere behind us, "you're going to open that mouth of yours so wide it'll choke you to death." It is Stump, standing down near the batwings, and his black eyes are furious. He waves his arm at Doc. "Now get outta here," he snaps, "before I get really mad and irrigate you."

None of us was able to figure, right then, how come Stump didn't plug Doc, instead of just talking about it. Later, we figured that Stump was in a pretty good mood to start with, on account of a big josh he'd just worked out to play on this Hooper. Also, the cat had just had his fill of playin' with the mouse by now, and was getting ready to kill it. And Doc was kind of an important man to have around, when there was some cleaning up to do after a killing.

You got to hand it to Stump. He might of been a mean, hard-hearted sidewinder, but he sure kept things a-humming. He calls a meeting in the Showdown that same evening, and when there ain't room enough inside the doors for a man to draw himself a good breath, Stump gets up on top of his bar and starts speechifying.

"I been thinking," says Stump. "It's two years now, since we started these diggings, and we ain't growed like we should. Ain't no law here, that's the trouble. Lots of folks hear about all the gun fightin' goin' on over here, and it scares 'em away. What this camp needs now is a Marshal to keep the peace. How's that strike you fellers?"

That struck us fellers just fine, on account Stump had coached us what to say beforehand.

"To my mind," goes on Stump, grinning some, "there ain't but one man for the job in these diggings. I'm referring," he says, important-like, "to the man that done us a favor in ridding this camp of that tough little gunslingin' sidewinder, Danny Inglehart, alias Homer Kane. In fact," says Stump, looking straight at the pilgrim, who is reddening up some, "I'm referring to friend Harry Hooper. How about that?" he hollers.

Well, sir, I never seen a man railroaded so quick as they railroad that Hooper. First thing he knows, Stump is pinning a big bright law badge onto Hooper's vest, and congratulating him on his new job. Then everybody starts doing some heavy drinking, by way of celebrating the big doings, which is good for Stump's business, and which also helps get Hooper in a proper condition for Stump's final josh.

When Hooper begins to get glazed in his eyes and stagger a little, one of Stump's

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sidekicks sneaks up behind the new-made Marshal, lifts that old wood-handled gun out of that ratty holster just as slick as can be, and replaces them six live cartridges with blanks. Hooper is that drunk, he don't even notice. Pretty near everybody in the place is on to what Stump means to do with that poor pilgrim next, and a lot of wolfish grins pass around from face to face in front of that bar.

Stump is drinking right alongside of this Hooper, a-slapping the big fellow on the back, and generally puffing him up, "gettin' him ready," as Doc Rainsock growls, disgusted, "for the kill."

"Yes, sir," says Stump, "this day'll go down in the history of the camp, Marshal. The day the Law come in. I'm right proud to of played a part in hangin' that badge on you, Hooper."

"Sure," lisps this Hooper, gettin' drunker than a hoot owl. "Thash right, Stumpy ol' fella."

And he claps Stump hard on the back. Then, without any warnin', he goes kind of green in the gills, clasps a sick hand to his stomach, and runs out in the street. He comes back wiping his mouth off with the sleeve of his coat, but with his shoulders thrown back, pretending nothing had went wrong with his stomach, and just to show he's a real tough hombre, he takes another big swig of Stump's bar whiskey.

Ain't a man in the place but knows Hooper's sick to his stomach, but nobody laughs at him out loud.

And then Stump gives one of his cronies the high sign, the man goes outside, and in a minute or so, comes a terrible banging and booming of gunfire out on the street.

"What's that?"

"Quiet, men," Stump says, real dramatic.

"Sounds like somebody was having a shooting fracas," this Hooper says, real important in back of that shiny new law badge.

"Reckon you'd ought to investigate, Marshal," says Stump, casual-like.

"Mebbeso I had," says Hooper, and goes a-lumbering outside there.

THERE IS a big moon shining down Prescott Street, lighting everything up pretty near good as daylight. Hooper slaps a hand onto his gun butt, and cranes his eyes up and down street, but he can't make out where the shooting come from. Comes

another shot from somewhere in back of Cy Openhammer's Dry Goods, and Hooper goes a-running up that way.

"Come out from them shadows," he yells, a brave man full of whiskey. "This here's the Law talkin'. Drop that gun and come out with your hands up. Move now, or I'll shoot." And he lifts that wood-handled six-shooter.

"Shoot and be damned!" comes back at him, gloomy. "I ain't a-scared of your bullets."

And who comes a-walking out of them shadows but Danny Inglehart, all powdered over, from head to foot, with chalk dust, and looking like nothing so much as his own ghost. "I reckon you kilt me," says Danny, real ghostlike and somber. "I come back to square accounts with you."

And so saying, he grabs his gun out of its holster, and sends a slug a-whistling alongside of the new Marshal's head.

You got to hand it to that Hooper. You take the average man, if the ghost of some feller he'd stove in was to step out of a shadow and start spanking hot lead towards him, he's like to turn green and make some fast tracks. But this Hooper just don't seem to know the meaning of fear. He yanks that old wood-handled gun up and pulls trigger once, and right there is where the big surprise comes in.

Danny Inglehart suddenly drops his gun, grabs a holt of his wrist, and starts hopping around first on one leg and then on the other, howling like a wild Injun.

"Dang fool," Stump snarls, "I told him to act like Hooper's slugs can't make no imprint on him, so Hooper'd figure he sure was up against a real live ghost. Danny's ruined the whole josh."

Stump goes a-walking out from the crowd and gives Danny a cuff on the side of the head. "Ya blame idiot! Thought I told you—" And then Stump gasps, staring down at Danny's wrist. There is a long-red furrow across the wrist, and blood is oozing from it. "What in tarnation," gulps Stump. "I thought there was blanks in the pilgrim's gun. He's tricked us. Why, I'll kill him for this. I'll—"

"You'll stand still," says Hooper, in a gravelly rumble, which does not even faintly resemble the high voice we are used to. "Don't move, Stump. I got the drop on you. And I put fresh cartridges in my gun

when I went out, playing like I was sick, in case you're wondering about it."

Stump stands there like a statue, looking crafty and mean and full of murder. "Just what kind of a game are you playin', Hooper?"

"My name," says this Hooper, "is 'Freeland,' Stump. Ed Freeland. I'm here to square accounts for my brother."

Stump goes kind of tense, like an animal that realizes it has walked into a trap.

"You took your time coming," he says, acting tough. "What kept you, Freeland?"

"Happens I was in jail," says the pilgrim, who don't look nearly so flabby now we know he is Joe Freeland's brother, come to avenge him. "Doin' time for manslaughter, Stump. Judge told me if he ever heard tell of me gettin' into a shooting fracas again, he'd put me away permanent. That's why I didn't tip my hand right away, when I first blew into camp." He is grinning, but there is nothing funny about it, as he says, "I figured it was my duty to kill you, but I had to scout around and find some way to manage it legal."

"Did you now?" sneers Stump. But his voice sounds kind of queer and he looks itchy and nervous. "Did you find one?"

"No," says the pilgrim. "You did. You pinned this badge on me. I reckon I can shoot a man in self defense any time I have a mind to, and as long as I'm wearin' this badge, folks'll figure I'm only doing my duty. I reckon you've played your last josh, Stump. Turn around now, slow and easy."

Stump turns, still holding his hands up.

"You can draw when you're ready," says the pilgrim, and then cuts it off short, for Stump is suddenly snapping a hand down at his gun, hoping to catch the pilgrim off balance.

Well, sir, like I say, Stump is the quick-

est-drawing* gunman in those diggings, and this time, he'd even caught the pilgrim off of his balance. But that Hooper, or Freeland, suddenly goes into a deep crouch, rears back hard and fast, and triggers through that ratty old holster. It is the prettiest sight you ever could see. His slug finds its target in Stump's middle just a fraction before Stump pulls the trigger. Stump's gun jerks off the line, and his slug whistles past Freeland's shoulder.

Stump comes a-staggering forward, hauling his gun up for a second shot at the pilgrim. Freeland pops him again, smack into the chest, and that Stump goes down in the dust like a stone. He lays there, gasping, coughing and choking, trying to cuss at the man that finally had give him a lesson in fancy lead throwing.

Freeland looks at him without any signs of being sorry for what he done to him. "That'll learn you to chop a man's fingers off him," he growls, shoving his gun back into that ratty old holster. He turns around to face Stump's cronies in the crowd. "Any of you fellers want to take up Stump's quarrel?" he says.

It don't seem like.

"All right," says Freeland. "Then I reckon I'll just keep on wearing this badge. From now on, this camp's goin to settle down an get law-abiding."

Which it does, and grows by the thousands, till today it's one of the biggest towns on the river.

Yes, sir, she's some town, and we've changed her name from Helltown to Freeland.

All on account, like Doc Rainsock'll tell you, of a cat that was fixing to play with a mouse, and run ahead on into trouble.

"That Stump," says Doc, "made the prettiest corpse I ever buried."



When the killer he was hunting turned at last into a snarling, deadly madman, something inside Sheriff Lew Walters turned his guts to water, made him a hunter turned hunted by the very fugitive he'd sought—until, in a back-to-the-wall showdown, he found, strangely, one last chance to prove himself a man!



*Novel
of a
Coward's
Last Stand*

YELLOW BADGE OF COURAGE



Shame and fear tore at his guts and sent him into a smouldering anger—an anger without purpose or control, and he knew he could not shoot. . . .

Chapter I

TURN TAIL, TINSTAR!

HE LAY there, the salty taste of blood strong in his mouth, the pain in the back of his head almost unbearable—while life swirled along the boardwalk less than ten feet away.

Once he tried to prop himself up on his elbows, failed, and slumped forward on his face again. After that, he did not move for half an hour.

Full consciousness came slowly, the fog

By MAX KESLER

clearing from his brain a little at a time. Somehow he managed to get to his knees, then his feet. He stood there a moment in the darkened alley, his legs trembling beneath him, and was violently sick.

Then, feeling a little better, he staggered out into the street—a lean man of medium height with a pair of bone-handled .44's at his hips and a lawman's star on his shirt front.

For perhaps a full minute, he was jostled by the crowd before he was noticed and recognized. "Holy smoke!" a burly roustabout shouted. "It's Lew Walters—the new sheriff!"

The crowd of roistering oil men fell back, suddenly silent, leaving Lew Walters standing isolated in a small semi-circle. Lew ran a hand through a mass of thick dark hair and tried to concentrate on the blurred faces around him. But somehow they kept shifting and weaving before his eyes. He felt as if he were going to drop.

"For gosh sakes, sheriff!" the big roustabout exclaimed. "What happened? You like sort of like a mule kicked you in the head!"

Lew Walters stared at him. "I don't know," he said dully. "I don't know." Then, turning, he stumbled down the street toward the Gusher Saloon. Right now he needed a drink to drive the weakness out of his legs.

He had gone less than a dozen feet when a roar of laughter broke from the crowd—laughter that rolled up and down the night-crowded street, drawing others to the scene to join in and add to the noise.

"Trust Buck Mason to do a thing like that!" Lew heard the big driller howl. "Buck's mean as a lobo, but he's sure got a sense of humor!"

Buck Mason! For just an instant Lew's stride faltered and an icy hand gripped his heart. Then he had control of himself—outwardly. He didn't know why the crowd was laughing because their new sheriff had been slugged from a dark alleyway—nor did he care. But Buck Mason—here in Marlow—!

Little beads of perspiration glistened on his face as he shoved into the kerosene-lamp lit Gusher Saloon. The old half-forgotten fear was back—strong and paralyzing as the day it had originated two years before. . . .

The Gusher was jammed with a crowd of eager, pleasure-bent oilmen. For this was an oil town—no different from a score of others that Lew Walters had known since his flight from Guthrie the night of his father's death that unforgettable night.

Here men lived, and worked, and fought—yes, and died, in search of black liquid gold. A dark viscid stream, spelling fortune for a few—heartbreak and death for the majority. And because they knew the odds against them, these men reached for their pleasure with the frantic instinct of those who are uncertain of tomorrow.

Conscious now of the many curious eyes upon him, Lew Walters stumbled to the bar and said, "A double!" to the squatly bartender. The bartender stared at his bloody head, then silently shoved a bottle and glass in front of him.

Lew wrapped his fingers around the glass and studied it a moment. He wondered if he could still the shaking of his hand long enough to down the drink.

Buck Mason! So that's why the town council, upon learning that Lew Walters—son of a famous lawman—was in town, had marched into the Gusher and broached the question to him when he had been too drunk to understand. Would he accept the job as sheriff of Marlow? The old sheriff had just died of a—a sudden illness!

Down to his last dollar, tired of running away, filled with a false sense of courage by the raw liquor in his veins, he, Lew, had agreed. A half hour later, still drunk, he had been sworn in as sheriff of Marlow in Judge Ben Ames' offices. But no one had mentioned the name of the man he had to kill or run out of town.

Lew glared at the beefy bartender now, and snapped, "Another!"

Pouring the drink, the fellow said, "You'd better get that head fixed up, sheriff. It's bleedin' considerable."

Lew didn't even hear him. He was thinking of the dirty deal the council had given him. No—they hadn't told him the man's name. They'd left that for him to find out when it was too late. Slow anger began to build up in him. God, how they must be laughing at him now! And him fool enough to believe that someone had finally given him a break!

Break, hell! The whole Strip knew that

his father—twenty-five years a sheriff—had been given an order to break Buck Mason's grip on the town of Guthrie two years before.

Mason, moving in from the Pennsylvania fields, had set up what he called a Protective Association against oil thieves. The charge had been a twenty-five cent assessment on each barrel of oil going to the shipping point. And Mason had had his men there to check the tally.

When men had protested that there had been no losses to oil thieves around Guthrie, Mason had said gently that there *could* and *would* be unless they joined. A few oil men had argued the point and held out. Of these, the majority had met violent deaths. In the end, the rest capitulated—but underneath their submission rebellious currents had begun to stir.

A Vigilante committee had gone to the town fathers of Guthrie demanding action. In turn, the council had dumped the matter gladly into the hands of Sheriff Jed Walters. And being no coward, Jed had gone out to do the job—with his deputy son, Lew, to back him up.

Lew's hand shook now as he tossed off his second drink. He scowled at his face in the back-bar mirror, conscious of the strained silence that had settled over the place. A man snickered—broke it off suddenly. Lew reached for the bottle again. To hell with the silence! To hell with everything and everybody! He tossed off the drink with a sullen gesture.

Sheriff Jed Walters had taken his son, Lew, along to back him up. Only, Lew thought bitterly, his son hadn't done it. Instead, when his father had gone down under the guns of Buck Mason and his two hawks, Shorty Williams and Slim Edwards, in front of the Last Chance he, Lew, had turned tail and run. Run like hell. . . .

HE LOOKED at the bartender now. "You don't understand, do you?"

Because he had seen many punch-drunk men before, the squatty man said, "Sure, sheriff, I understand."

"The hell you do!" Lew snapped. No one understood. They didn't know what it meant to see your father—the man you had always regarded as invincible—lying face down in the street, those two famous .44's

still gripped in his dead hands and blood staining the street beneath his body.

Lew had grown up to believe that law and order were easily maintained. His father had always made it look that way until Buck Mason had moved in on the Guthrie fields. But with his father lying there in the street, the life blood pouring out of him, Lew Walters had suddenly realized that the tight-lipped, grim-faced men elected to preserve the law and order did-so at a price—that of their lives.

Fear then—a terrible, unreasoning fear—had propelled him away from the Last Chance with the derisive laughter of Mason following him. Mason had not even seen fit to waste lead on a coward—particularly a twenty-three-year-old one.

Jim Walters, however, had gone down fighting. He had stopped Shorty Williams with a bullet in the heart and Slim with one in the leg. Mason, as far as the fight was concerned, had gotten off easy.

But the Vigilante group—enraged by Jim Walter's death as well as by his son's cowardice—had taken the bit between its teeth and shattered Mason's power in and around Guthrie. Mason and Slim Edwards had been lucky to get clear of town ahead of a lynch mob.

Heading in another direction that same night had gone Lew Walters—ashamed, afraid, his confidence shattered. And for five years, following him from one town to another, his reputation had followed and hounded him. *Coward!*

He'd worked as cowhand, roughneck, anything for a few weeks until his past caught up with him. Then he'd move on once more—always moving—without hope, without ambition, without future. A living dead man—killed by his own cowardice.

No longer afraid of just Buck Mason—but of guns and violent death and dying for the sake of a hundred dollars a month and a tin star.

Now—after two years—his and Mason's trails had crossed again, and once more the old fear was deep within him. Not just an intangible fear of violence, but a real, paralyzing fear of the man who had gunned down his father while he had run off—a yellow-bellied coward.

He wanted to run now. That damned council! But that's what he got for being drunk the night before. Now he was

trapped—and there was no way out.

He scowled at himself in the mirror, hating the thought that was in his mind, yet powerless against it. His horse was outside. He had only to walk out of this dance-hall-saloon, mount, and ride out of town. Keep riding, keep running. They weren't going to send him out to die like his father!

According to the council, Mason had set up his "Protective" Association here some ten months ago and forced the operators—most of them at least—to join. The same old tactics as he had used in Guthrie. Half veiled threats, then violence. The operators had demanded that the sheriff break up Mason's abortive scheme and chase him out of town. That was when the old sheriff had become "sick" and suddenly died.

Yeah, Lew's face was white now as he reached for the bottle again. Well, they'd tricked him into this, but he wasn't staying. He knew how they'd figured things. They'd known who he was—known that he was a coward. Yet they had taken a chance that the years might have matured him. Perhaps the knowledge that his father's killer was the man he had to chase out of town or kill might send him on a revenge-bent mission. It was that simple. They had nothing to lose and everything to gain. To hell with a broken-down bum and what happened to him!

Well, to hell with the council! To hell with the town! To hell with this damned tin star! He was getting out.

For the first time, he became aware of the laughter breaking about him—still low, but mounting in volume. Derisive laughter—much as he had experienced in the street a few months ago.

His mouth tightened, and for just an instant some of the old fire began to smoulder within him. Then as quickly as it had flared up, it died. Why shouldn't they laugh, he wondered bitterly. His first day as sheriff, and he'd been ambushed and left lying in a dark alley on his first official tour.

He couldn't even remember what had happened. A sudden terrific blow on the back of the head—and darkness. Then several hours later he had come to, to find himself sprawled in a darkened alley.

Let them laugh their guts out! He deserved it. He rated every bit of ridicule they cared to heap upon him. He was not

only a coward, but a damned fool as well!

The laughter was growing—openly frank now. He had to get out of here. He reached in his hip pocket for his bill-fold. Pay for these damn drinks and get out!

A frown settled between his wide-spaced gray eyes. He was sure that he had put his wallet in his right hip pocket. But it wasn't there now. Hastily, he fished into the other hip pocket. Then something like panic gripped him, and he was searching now with feverish, trembling hands.

That wallet had contained the fifty dollars the council had advanced him to live on—every dime he had in the world. Suddenly it dawned on him with horrible clarity. *Whoever had struck him down in the alley had robbed him!* Lew Walters, newly appointed sheriff of Marlow, entrusted with the security of the town, hadn't even been able to protect his own salary!

He looked at the bartender, a slow flush creeping over his lean face. "I must have lost my wallet!"

A roar that shook the ceiling went up from the crowd then—a derisive thundering cacaphony of sound that reverberated from one end of the room to the other and back again.

Lew whirled and faced them—really angry now, for the first time. This was not the bluff, coarse humor of the oilfields that a man could laugh off. There was a malicious sound to it that sent the blood rushing to his face.

"Shut up, damn you all!" he shouted. But if they heard him at all above the noise they gave no indication of it. Their laughter mounted. Sensing his anger, a good many boos and cat-calls rose above the noise.

In that moment, he hated them—hated them enough to kill. For they were suddenly representative of all the contempt, the mockery, and the persecution which he had undergone the past two years. They lacked the guts themselves to pin a star on their chest and face death from hidden guns. Yet they laughed at a man who had tried it—even though he had failed.

His hands flashed downward and up again in one of the fastest draws even the oldest among them had ever seen. The bone handled .44's bucked and a couple of slugs whined over the crowd to thud into the wall. The laughter stopped as if by

magic—and a tense, startled silence fell over the room.

Chapter II

A LADY WITH GUTS

LEW WALTERS leaned back against the bar. He was cool now—cool and dangerous. Yet he knew that it was only a momentary thing—brought on by his anger. If Buck Mason walked in through the door now, Lew Walters would turn and run. But right now, he was his father's son.

He looked the crowd over hard. Then he said softly, "Maybe one of you won't mind telling me just what's so damned funny. I'd sort of like a laugh, too."

The crowd shifted nervously, but no one spoke. The whole situation had suddenly changed. Laughing at a man with a bloody head who was obviously trying to bolster his courage by gulping down straight Scotch was one thing. Laughing at this cold-eyed sheriff with twin bone-handled sixguns in his hands was another. Especially after having witnessed the incredible speed of his draw.

"All right," Lew's voice grew ugly with a growing hysteria. After two years of this he had reached the breaking point. "Let's have it. What's so damned funny?"

It was the squatty bartender who broke the tension. He tapped Lew on the shoulder and said quietly, "You can't blame them, sheriff. You want to know why? Here. Take a look at this!"

Lew turned—and suddenly the anger was gone—replaced by a fear that left his legs trembling beneath him. He knew that it must have shown on his face, but if it did

the bartender gave no indication that he had noticed it.

He said quietly, "That was pinned on your back, sheriff. Reckon folks couldn't help laughing. That ain't happened to a sheriff in the town's history."

Lew stared at the sheet of letter-head stationery boldly carrying the heading *Oilmen's Protective Association, Buck Mason, Pres.*, then said hoarsely, "Give me another shot!"

It was not until he had downed the liquor and the fiery stuff had begun to warm his fear-chilled body that he mustered the courage to read the big, pencilled writing once more. Printed in inch-high letters, Buck Mason's challenge was unmistakable.

I DON'T KNOW IT YET BUT I WAS
SLUGGED AND ROBBED BY BUCK
MASON. AND IF I DON'T GET THE
HELL OUT OF TOWN LIKE A GOOD
BOY I'M LIABLE TO GET KILLED—
JUST LIKE MY PA.

White-faced, Lew turned back to the crowd, his voice lashing out. "Some things are funny and I can laugh them off," he said harshly. "This isn't. Who pinned this on my back?"

A bull-neck driller shoved forward. He was scowling and his eyes were ugly. "I don't like your tone of voice, sheriff. I figure you better change it. Far's I'm concerned, that star on your chest don't mean a damned thing. I figure it's the man behind it that counts. And you just don't count worth a—"

All the humiliation and insults of the past two years boiled to the surface in Lew. He took one quick step forward and uncorked a right that slammed the big man out cold on his back. But then there had

HEADACHE

UPSET
STOMACH

JUMPY
NERVES



RELIEF!

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been more than brute force behind that blow—there had been the desperate fury of a man persecuted.

The silence was nerve-wracking now. Men looked at one another with startled eyes. It seemed impossible that a man as fast with a gun and as hard with his fists as this new sheriff could be a coward.

Yet they had seen him whiten and his hands clutch at the bar when he had read that scrawled note. They saw him standing there now, the town's sheriff, who had been slugged and robbed by a man who had a public contempt of him.

The sheriff might look flashy as long as no bullets were flying. But when the cards were down and the pay-off was in lead, he lacked what it took—*guts*!

Lew sensed this train of thought in the crowd, saw it in the curl of their lips. And he knew that nothing had changed. Nothing would ever change until he had conquered his fear and faced Buck Mason over a gun-sight. And that was something he could never do. He was yellow—yellow to the core!

Yet something drove him on. Some inner compulsion that made him insist on hearing what he already knew to be the truth. Reaching down, he grabbed the bull-necked man, half conscious now, by the collar and rasped, "I asked you a question! Answer, damn you! Who pinned that note on my back?"

The driller stared at him with glazed eyes. Disgusted, Lew let him drop back to the floor. As he turned, a mocking voice challenged him from the crowd.

"Stop stalling, sheriff! That fancy fist work ain't impressing nobody. You know damn well who put it there—the same man who slugged you and robbed you. Buck Mason! Now, you goin' after him? Or are you goin' to turn tail and run like you did when Mason killed your Pa in Guthrie?"

The speaker—a tall, cadaverous man with a straggly mustache—grinned.

The crowd's surprised fear of Lew was gone. Here and there men took up the cry. "Yeah, sheriff, you seem right handy with your guns and your fists. Why not?"—"You can find Mason at the Midnight Saloon. He'll be right glad to see you!"—"How fast kin you run a mile, sheriff? Heard you broke some sort of record the night Mason killed your Pa!"

Lew Walters stood there, his face growing whiter. These people heckling him now were not the oil operators who were being ground under the heel of Buck Mason's tyranny. These were drillers, tool dressers, roughnecks, hangers-on—men who took no sides. They didn't particularly care whether Mason ruled the country, or whether the operators ruled it. Not as long as they had their jobs.

The cadaverous man sneered, "You hear 'em, sheriff. Well, what are you going to do?"

The veins in Lew's neck stood out in stark relief. He wanted to kill this man—knew that he could—knew that he wasn't afraid. He took a half step forward, and the cadaverous heckler fell back. Then suddenly Lew's shoulders sagged. What right had he to jump a man for telling the truth? Hell, he had no right to resent anything these people said? The truth was the truth; he *was* a coward. A scared man with a star on his shirt. A man afraid to go out and kill his father's murderer. A man who lacked the courage to restore the dignity of the law which Buck Mason had mocked.

SENSING his hesitation, the crowd began to heckle again. "What you goin' to do about it, sheriff?"

Fine beads of perspiration glistened on Lew Walters' forehead. He turned this way and that, but only contemptuous eyes met his.

Something snapped in him then. He knew that he could not carry this thing through. Buck Mason had known that too when he had slugged and robbed him and pinned this arrogant challenge on his back.

Mason had made him the laughing-stock of the town and the butt of contempt for every hanger-on in the oil fields. Mason and that damned city council! But then, even without knowing that Mason and his Protective Association were in control here, he was a fool to have thought he could hold down a sheriff's job!

He'd show them how big a fool he was! He fumbled at the clasp of the lawman's badge on his shirt. Let them take back their little tin badge! He was scared, yellow—he admitted it. But then every man was afraid of someone or something. He was afraid of Buck Mason.

He was still struggling with the badge's

clasp when a tall, slim dark-haired girl in a rich blue satin dress swirled through the crowd and faced them, her eyes blazing angrily.

Lew heard someone mutter, "It's Gail Saunders!" and a hoarse voice whisper, "Yeah—and she's madder'n a hornet!"

Gail Saunders! Lew caught his breath. He'd heard of her. But who hadn't? Known to the Strip as *The Lady from Boston*, her beauty and her fiery temper made her name legion among oil field men.

Daughter of a Massachusetts politician who had made the mistake of opposing her desire for a theatrical career, she'd kissed the family—and the family fortune—good-bye and started out on her own.

When Congressman Saunders, thinking of family pride and political prestige, had brought pressure to bear on major Eastern producers to keep them from hiring her, she'd packed her bags and headed for California.

But she had gotten no further than the Cherokee Strip. Its fortune in oil, the bleak country, and lonely men starved for entertainment fascinated her. With a year, her personality and her rich, husky voice had made her famous. Within another year, she had bought The Gusher and made it the most elaborate emporium west of the Mississippi. Her nightly show was as good as many in the East, and she, herself, considered "the best damn singer in the country."

Watching her now, with the kerosene light playing through the dark hair—listening to her husky voice lashing out at the crowd—Lew thought he had never seen anyone so beautiful. As he listened to her attack his tall, vicious tormentor, he knew he had never felt quite so ashamed.

"You've been coming into my place for the past six months, Jed Masters," Gail Saunders said heatedly. "Buying the cheapest drinks in the house and staying all evening! Talking a lot and saying nothing! Cheap! Cheap with talk! Cheap with action!"

The cadaverous man flushed. "Now just a minute, Miss Gail," he protested mildly. "You got no right to—"

"Don't tell me my rights in my own place, Masters!" She stepped in close and Jed Masters retreated. "You—yes, and the rest of you," she ripped mercilessly at the

crowd; "what sort of men are you to ridicule an injured man?"

"You say he's a coward. He hasn't left town yet—and he won't. The office of sheriff was vacant for six weeks. I didn't see any one you offering to pin that star on your chest! Why didn't *you* take the job, Jed? You're always telling other people how to run things. Why didn't you get in there?"

Jed Masters' eyes shifted away from her. "Hell, Miss Gail, I ain't a lawman by nature!"

"Perhaps the sheriff here isn't either," she retorted. "Remember, no one asked him whether he wanted the job or not. The council caught him drunk and had him sworn in before he knew what had happened. He's human just like the rest of you. Maybe he doesn't like the idea of being killed any more than you do!"

The crowd shifted nervously. No one spoke.

To Lew Walters, this was the last stage of his degeneration. He—the son of one of the Strip's most respected lawmen—standing by, letting a woman defend him from ridicule and contempt!

He had kept silent before because he was convinced that he deserved their contempt; now he found it difficult to intercede because of shame. He knew what she must think of him. What *any* decent woman must think of him.

Yet despite his shame, something drove him forward. He said quietly, "I'm grateful, Miss—but I'm used to fighting my own battles. I don't be hiding behind a woman's skirts!"

Gail Saunders turned, her fine eyes—dark with anger—meeting his. "You don't seem to be doing a very good—" She broke off, and her eyes dropped. Then she looked up at him. "Would you take me for a walk, sheriff?"

A quick retort leaped to his lips. He knew she was trying to get him away from the crowd. But the sudden quiet serenity of her face, the obvious sincerity in her voice made him leave the retort unvoiced.

He hesitated, gave her a long look, and then said, "It's an honor, Miss."

A faint smile curved her full lips. She turned and called to the squatty bartender, "Drinks are on the house, Joe. Not because I like the crowd, but to keep peace!"

Without a word, she hooked her arm in Lew's and led the way outside.

Lew's mouth was bitter, and self-hatred was beginning to build up. This woman—beautiful and known throughout the Strip—walked beside him as though he was a true representative of law and order instead of a coward with water in his veins!

Chapter III

AWFUL DAMN' DEAD!

GAIL SAUNDERS paused at last under a big oak that lined the quiet street where she had purposely led Lew Walters. She stood there a moment, her arm linked in his, studying him with intent eyes. Neither had spoken during the long walk from The Gusher. Lew because he was too ashamed. Gail because she sensed his humiliation.

At last she said quietly, "You *are* afraid, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "Yes, I'm afraid."

She began to walk again, slowly, giving him a chance to gain control of himself. They went perhaps half a block before she spoke again.

"You know," she said, half in retrospect. "Life's funny. We live out our span, and most of us are happy doing it. Yet none of us are completely free from fear. Some of us are afraid of life in general; some of us of poverty, sickness, prestige—oh, many things. And then there are some of us who are afraid of—shall we say, *foolish* things. Shadows. Things that don't even exist except in our own minds."

Lew's laughter was harsh. "My Dad was one of the best sheriffs with a gun in the country. Yet Mason and his professionals killed him. I suppose you mean it's foolish for me to be afraid of Mason. Is that it?"

She did not answer at once, but walked with her head down as though framing her words. "No, that's not it exactly," she replied. "You're not really afraid of Mason; you just *think* you are."

"You see, when you ran away after seeing your father killed, you took it for granted that you were a coward. Why? Because the town said so. But actually you did what any ordinary man would have done. You ran away because common sense

told you that you didn't have a chance. Because reason told you it was better to run and live to fight again."

"And I've kept right on running!" Lew said bitterly.

"Because you let this thing get the best of you," she pointed out. "You let it grow and grow until it got beyond control. *You made yourself believe you were a coward!* You're like a child in the dark—afraid of something that isn't there!"

He looked down at her as they turned a corner. He said, "Buck Mason's very *much* here."

"Yes. But Mason is just another man," she replied quickly. "A man just like you—only not as good a one. Either inside, or with a gun. I saw that draw of yours, Lew Walters. It's the fastest thing in the country. Mason wouldn't have a chance against you, and you and I both know it. As I told you, you're afraid of nothing except a shadowy thing that doesn't even exist."

"I suppose you'll tell me that a bullet don't kill," he jeered. "And that Death don't exist."

After a moment she said, "Does it—that is, always, I mean? A bullet can kill the body. But *fear* can kill the part of a man that *really* counts. Self-respect, honor, decency. And as for death—it's a beginning, not an end. To die isn't hard. To live is."

Pausing, she placed her hand on his arm. For a long moment, she stood looking at him with those fine dark eyes. Lew squirmed inwardly. What she had said was true. And in this moment he could almost believe the other things she had said. A part of the fear that had ridden with him for two years seemed to lift a little. But the terror had been with him too long to be thrown aside in a few minutes.

Gail must have read his thoughts, but if she did so she gave no indication of the fact. When she spoke at last, there was a quiet serenity in her voice.

She said, "I'm going to leave you here, Lew. But before I go—did you ever hear of the Cherokee Kid?"

"Sure." Lew stared at her curiously. "One of the worst killers in the country. Shot down last year in Seminole by a cross-draw artist named Scanlon. Why?"

Pain lay naked in her eyes then. She drew in her breath and said quietly, "The Kid was my brother! He ran once too,

just like you. Only instead of keeping on running, he turned to fight, but in the wrong way. When a man taunted him as a coward, he killed them. He was fast. You know that.

"After a while killing became a means of convincing himself that he *wasn't* a coward. But he was, and he died afraid. His fear destroyed not only him, but my mother, and left my father a ruined, broken man.

"Think about that, as well as your father, when you go into The Midnight after Buck Mason. Think hard, Lew Walters, and *keep on thinking!*"

She turned and vanished in the crowd. Uncertainty returned. While he was with her, everything she had said seemed true and sensible. Buck Mason *was* just another man and Lew could beat him to the draw. But now—

Wearily, he turned and started down the street. It was no use. He knew what he was going to do—fork his horse and get the hell out of town. It was all very well for Gail Saunders to have talked about shadows, but Buck Mason wasn't a shadow!

Light spashed across the boardwalk in front of him and he looked up. Only then did he realize where he was, and that Gail Saunders had deliberately led him there.

But staring at the weather-beaten sign creaking in the wind there was no longer any of that courage within him. There was nothing but an overpowering sense of fear that left him weak and dripping with perspiration. For the sign read The Midnight Saloon and the two men sitting on the dimly lit veranda, their cigarettes glowing redly, were Slim Edwards and Buck Mason.

There were other men ranged along the veranda, too, and still others watching tensely from up and down the street. Lew was dimly conscious of this fact. But there was little room in his mind now save a paralyzing fear, and an inhuman desire to put as much distance as possible between the man on the veranda and himself.

He was afraid—more than afraid. He was re-living a horrible nightmare. . . . Seeing his father lying in the dusty street of Guthrie, blood trailing from beneath him to stain the ground. . . . Seeing Buck Mason, Shorty Williams, and Slim Edwards pouring shots into his father's body. . . . Hearing Buck Mason's derisive laughter

lashing out at him as, panic-stricken, he turned and ran.

That was what he wanted to do now. Run, *run*, and keep on running! But the same fear that made him want to run froze him helpless now. He could do nothing but stare at Buck Mason's lean, handsome face, at the cold eyes mocking him.

Mason had changed but little during the past two years. He still dressed like a dandy. His figure as he stood up now seemed to have lost none of its cat-like liteness. He was still Buck Mason. Shrewd, clever, powerful, and a killer.

"**H**ELLO, Walters." Mason's voice was faintly mocking. "Heard you were in town, but didn't figure you'd be around to see me. Matter of fact, I sort of thought you'd be on your way as soon as you'd sobered up and found out you were sheriff. Sheriffs don't seem to have much luck around here for some reason."

Lounging casually against a veranda post, Slim Edwards laughed—low, taunting laughter that lashed out at Lew like a whip. Lew colored, feeling a quick anger toward the slim, gangling killer. He *wasn't* afraid of Edwards.

But then the anger was gone—swept away by the knowledge that if he started a play toward the slim man it would suck Mason into the game. He wet his lips and stood there, sweat running down his body.

He tried to think of Gail Saunders, standing back there in The Gusher defending him against the ridicule of the crowd, of the long walk along the quiet street with her arm resting lightly on his, of her husky voice telling him that Buck Mason *was* just another man whom he could beat to the draw. He tried to remember what she had said about her brother, the Cherokee Kid.

But it was no use. He blinked the perspiration out of his eyes and tried to still the dull pounding of his heart. Buck Mason was more than a shadow, to him at least. He was a nightmarish monster that had hounded him, Lew, for seven long years.

Gail Saunders had said that it was all in his mind. Hell, what was there but the mind? All that fine talk wasn't helping any now. He *knew* that unless he got away from here fast, Buck Mason and Slim Edwards would kill him—just as they had

killed his father two years before. All Mason wanted him to do was make a move—even a little one. The minute he did, they'd cut him down.

Mason sat on the banister now and from the dimness said, "There's talk going around that the operators here don't like my Protective Association. Me, I think twenty-five cents a barrel is plenty cheap for protection against oil thieves. Don't you, sheriff?"

Lew's legs were trembling beneath him now. The trap was closing in, slowly but surely. He knew what Mason was up to, but was too much of a coward to fight back.

Hating himself for saying it, he mumbled, "Yeah, sounds reasonable. If there's oil piracy going on here."

"Oh, but there is, sheriff," Mason went on in a soft voice. "I'm telling you that. And Buck Mason don't lie, does he, sheriff?"

Desperately, Lew's eyes flicked up and down the street, noting the little groups of men straining to hear what was going on. Word had gotten around that the sheriff had gone to The Midnight and was heading for a showdown with Mason. An air of tense expectation hung over the entire town now—a silent waiting for the storm to break. For a *man* to break, and run away again.

Once already today, Mason had made him the laughing-stock of the town by robbing him and pinning that sign on his back. Now he was doing it again, only this time there was a deadly purpose behind it.

Mason was deliberately trying to force his hand, and Lew knew it. For Mason didn't want him to run this time. Mason wasn't going to give him the chance to give that star back to the council and clear out. He was trying to goad him into a fight, knowing that fear-tightened reflexes could never beat his draw. Especially with Slim Edwards to back him up.

The fear was a horrible, gnawing thing in Lew's stomach now—twisting, strangling the breath from him. He wiped the sweat from his face and stared at Mason.

He wasn't going to be sucked in—no matter what Mason said or did. Let Mason insult him; let him insult the law; let the crowd laugh their damned heads off at their yellow sheriff! To hell with the crowd! He

was going to ride away alive! When you died, you were awful damn' dead!

Chapter IV

BLOOD-STAINED WHITE FEATHER

HE WINCED as Mason's voice, dangerously demanding, insistent, reached out at him. "I said, sheriff—Buck Mason never lies, *does he?*"

Lew wet his dry lips. The blood was pounding hard in his temples, reaching around to beat at the wound on the back of his head. "No," he said hoarsely.

The tip of Mason's cigarette glowed redly in the dimness. Slim Edwards still lounged casually against the veranda post. He had not moved. His hands were hooked easily into the heavy gun-belts circling his waist. He reminded Lew somehow of a lobo waiting for the kill.

"Glad to hear you say that, sheriff." Mason's voice sounded almost friendly. Mason had but one thought in mind—to teach the town and the operators that they'd better not buck his Protective Association. The town had already lost one sheriff. Now they were going to lose another.

"Only thing, sheriff," Mason's voice was mockingly serious. "I reckon maybe some of the folks standing further off didn't hear you. Maybe you'd better turn around and say it again—*real loud.*"

A couple of men standing a dozen feet away laughed, but their laughter sounded strangely out of place in the flat silence that lay over the street. The scene had now ceased to be funny. The townfolk were beginning to realize that upon the outcome of this pitiful, unequal struggle of wills hinged the future of their own lives.

For if Lew Walters broke now and showed the white feather, there would be no one left to oppose Mason's vicious, crooked Protective Association. Little by little he would up his assessments, and the operators would have no choice but pay.

Their own cowardice, their own weakness in giving in to Mason would destroy them. Furthermore, they were gradually beginning to realize that they, not a one of them, had any right to laugh at this slender man waging a bitter battle within himself.

"Did you hear me, sheriff?" Mason's

voice had quickly taken on a knife-edge.

Lew stood there, his body braced against an invisible force. His teeth sank into his lower lip. A thin trickle of blood flowed from the corner of his mouth, but he did not feel it. His clenched hands felt moist, clammy.

He said nothing. Along with the shame and fear within him was a smouldering anger—an anger which he told himself desperately that he had to control. He thought, *How much more of this can I stand?* And, at the same time, he was idiotically grateful that Kitty—a woman whom he had known for less than an hour—was not here to witness his degradation.

"Yes," he said in a choked voice. "Yes, I hear you, Mason."

"Then maybe you don't want to say it, sheriff? Maybe you think I'm a liar and a crook? Is that it?"

The silence was almost screaming at him now. But from one of the honkytonks further down the street the loud, blatant noise of a tinny piano kept on and on—playing upon the tight strings of men's nerves.

On the veranda, Mason stood up, calmly and slowly. Without turning his head, he said to Edwards, "The sheriff sort of looks like he's in a daze, Slim. Maybe you'd better wake him up."

Slim Edwards dropped his cigarette, ground out the glowing tip beneath his boot heel, and shoved lazily away from the post support.

Dull-eyed, Lew watched Edwards as he eased his sixgun from its holster. He knew Slim wouldn't kill him now. Not even Mason would make the mistake of having a man shot down without a fight. No—this was simply some more humiliation. Make him do a bullet-dance or something of the sort. Well, he'd do it! He'd do *anything* until he could get away from this torment!

Yet some of the instincts that he had inherited from his fighting father were struggling within him now. The smouldering anger was beginning to glow.

He realized that this thing was bigger than he was, bigger than any man. Neither he nor his Dad meant anything in the march of progress. It was the law—and the respect of the law—that was important. It was upon him as a lawman that the present and future of the public rested.

The freedom of the country from the persecution of men such as Buck Mason depended upon its lawmen.

The line of his angular jaw hardened. He was still afraid, to damn' afraid to face Mason. If he had only to face other criminals, he might make a good sheriff. Yet if he ran from Mason, he would never have a chance to show it.

Now his shoulders slumped again. Hell, he had been day-dreaming! He was what he was—too yellow to help himself. He'd run now. Or, worse, knuckle down and then run. He'd always run. It was nothing new.

The gun in Slim Edwards' hand sent a long streak of flame into the darkness. Then, almost on the heels of the shot, a woman screamed—not in fright, but in agony.

A cold hand clutched Lew Walters' heart. He recognized that husky voice, pitched high with pain. Slim's shot—fired blind into the darkness—had struck Gail Saunders! That meant that Gail had been standing on the outskirts of the crowd, trying to help him!

A man yelled from the darkness, "Damn you, Williams, you've just kilt the Lady from Boston!"

An angry roar went up from the crowd, a roar that rapidly gained in volume. But Lew Walters, with the words *You've just killed the Lady from Boston* echoing in his mind, didn't hear it. He didn't hear anything, see anything except Slim Edwards standing there with that sixgun in his hand—and Buck Mason standing tensely to one side.

Lew felt cold all over. There was no fear within him now. There was nothing but the single thought that Slim had just killed the only human being who had ever understood and tried to help him.

He was not conscious that his hands were curved in above the twin bone-handled .44's. He saw Slim's startled face looming out of the dimness, and with his eyes glued to that target, he drew and fired.

A slug from Slim's gun burned across his cheek, then Slim was tumbling from the veranda with a bullet through his head.

To one side, Buck Mason opened up from the shadows. And Lew Walters, standing in the street—with the light from The Midnight pouring over the top of the swinging

doors—made a good target. As Lew spun to face Mason's gun, a slug in his chest rocked him back a couple of steps.

Lew stayed on his feet and plowed forward. Another bullet hit him, this time higher up. He coughed, staggered—but kept going. He was a relentless machine of destruction now, a machine with but one thought in mind—to kill!

Mason's next shot went wild, and Lew triggered at the red flare. Mason cried out. Then Mason unleashed a sudden burst with both guns!

A slug slammed into Lew's thigh, and he went to his knees. But as he did so, he let go with both guns. From the shadows Mason screamed in agony as a half dozen red-hot slugs ripped into his belly.

Lew kept firing. Only when the hammers of the .44's clicked on the empty shell casings did he stop. By then he could no longer squeeze the triggers. He was on his knees, fighting desperately to keep from falling. Once you fell, you were finished.

He felt no pain. The heavy slugs had provided a temporary merciful blackout. It was difficult to breathe, to hold his head up. People were around him now and he heard a voice from far away saying, "Hell, he's bad hit! Somebody go get Doc Hayes, pronto!"

The ground was cool beneath his shoulders now. He didn't remember having fallen. Perhaps he hadn't. Perhaps they had stretched him out. He was lying in the street, his guns still in his hands, dying as his father had died before him.

Damned if he'd die flat on his back! If he had die, he'd die on his feet! He tried to raise himself on his elbows, but a fit of coughing seized him and he fell back—seeing nothing, hearing nothing, nor caring.

...

IT WAS two months before Lew Walters was able to take up his duties as sheriff of Marlow again. Old Doc Hayes, in giving him permission to return to work, had said, "By rights—and all the laws of medicine—you ought to be dead, Lew. That you're not, you can thank God, not me!"

Walking slowly down the street, Lew smiled, remembering. Doc Hayes was a fine doctor, an even finer man. They had had a long talk the night before about certain things—one of them being Gail Saun-

ders, and how he really felt about her.

To Lew's questions about how badly Gail had been hit by Slim Edwards, stray bullet, Doc had been both mysterious and evasive. He gave Lew the same answer he had the first time Lew regained consciousness.

"She wasn't hurt bad, Lew. Just a scratch—more scared than anything."

But to Lew, puzzling over the fact now, it didn't make sense. Gail Saunders hadn't struck him as the sort to be easily frightened. Doc was keeping the truth from him. She must have been hit, and hit hard.

Doc had talked to him about other things—all relating to the same subject, Gail Saunders. Doc had said thoughtfully, "Gail's a fine woman, Lew. She's beautiful, got a good education, and a brain to go with it. She's been mighty successful the past three years. But I've got an idea she's had her fling now as a career woman."

"I sort of suspect she wants a home and a man to look after her. Maybe kids running around under her feet. She's not happy now. I know. You see, there's not much about a person's private life a doctor don't know. Gail's had a lot of trouble in her life, also, Lew. Family disowned her, brother turned killer—a lot of things."

He'd leaned forward, his shrewd old eyes piercing. "Gail likes you, son. Remember, you didn't cut a very brave figure there in The Gusher that night she defended you. Average woman wouldn't have spit on you then."

"But Gail's smart. She saw something in you worth saving. And she fought to save it. And she proved to the town that she was right. I guess maybe if you sort of paid court to her—"

The smile broadened on Lew's lips now, but it was bitter and without humor. Old Doc, a bachelor, was nothing but a romantic fool! Gail Saunders—beautiful, successful and sought after by every man in the country—interested in a hundred-dollar-a-month sheriff! Doc must be crazy!

But then he was suddenly serious. If he didn't believe Doc, then why was he on his way to see Gail Saunders now? He'd done a lot of thinking during those long weeks flat on his back, fighting for life. He knew he had found himself at last. He knew he had the respect of the town and a job

(Continued on page 128)

By **HAROLD
F. CRUICKSHANK**

Could Ramrod, battle-wise boss of his proud antelope herd, guide them safely through the perils of coyote claws, rattler fangs, and man's firesticks—or must he go with them to death in that do-or-die struggle against the tyrannical wilderness?



Ramrod spun the torn gray shape from him, high into the air. . . .

Ramrod of the Rocky Peaks

"RAMROD," the Green River cowhands called him—the king buck of the antelope band. The top-hands recognized him as soon as they glimpsed him, for due to an injury, his right ear flopped strangely. The bad aim of a hunter had cut a ligament.

Ramrod whistled sharply, startled by the buzzing of a rattler. All in the one motion he bounded to all fours, cleared a clump of

sagebrush and got a line on his target—a rattler coiled ready to strike at a quivering fawn.

The handsome little king buck grunted as he bunched momentarily, suddenly to rise and chop down, his four hoofs close together. There was the sound of soggy impact as those deadly sharp hoofs mashed in. The snake squirmed in its last few convulsions, then lay belly up.

Ramrod's big, beautiful eyes now widened, as he blew through his red-flared nostrils. He lowered his head and scooped up the snake, tossing it to the brush. Swiftly he whirled about on the fawn to strike the cringing creature with his muzzle—rocking him back on his haunches.

Ramrod called up an old doe. She came in hissing, whistling, but the belligerent pose of the king buck warned her. "Old Lady," queen of the small Green River pronghorn band, was possessed of a great wisdom. Her sense of smell was keen, and as she picked up the tang of snake scent she whirled and grunting softly.

Blowing grandiosely, Ramrod turned, to chop mincingly to a knoll. A freshening wind was stirring and he was not sure of the identity of the scents.

All at once he whistled and his great patches heliographed warning signals to the grazing band. His keen eyes, as well as his sharp sense of smell, had picked out a family of coyotes stealing across an alkaline flat. The coyotes, led by their mother, were already fanning out, preparing for the formation, relay, and chase of the pronghorn band.

But Ramrod, ever alert, relied on Old Lady to start the little herd off to safety. She was quick to catch his signals. She whistled back to him as she rose and wheeled to lead off in high and graceful bounding lopes. Old Lady was heading the band for the rolling, brush-studded hills to the northwest.

For some moments, the little king buck stood his ground. Fleet of foot, he could afford to be daring and defiant in the knowledge that he could outrun any coyote on the plains. Suddenly he lifted his body and whipped sharply off toward the southeast. A pair of coyotes, young and immature in hunting strategy, at once turned to give chase.

Before the full ashes of dusk sifted down on the rolling rangeland, the coyote pair had flopped to their bellies, tongues lolling. The Ramrod's time had not yet come. He had lived for many years on this hinterland range and knew all its folds of ground, every meadow, brush clump and timber belt. Now, though his sides bellowsed sharply, he reached high, and plucked a tender shoot from a high wild fruit shrub.

Finally, his wind recovered, he turned

and minced delicately to a small, favorite drinking spring where he drank lightly before heading on toward his band.

As darkness deepened the little king buck lay in solitude, but though he rested, all his senses were alert, attuned to the sounds and scents about him as he blinked into the shuddering display of sheet lightning along the westerly horizon.

When at last he caught an all's-well signal from Old Lady, he settled to sleep, relieved for the time being at least of his great responsibility of herd protector and sentinel.

It was the tang of man scent at dawn that aroused Ramrod. He came to all fours shaking himself as if to rid his coat of a heavy blanket of dew.

Now he stood, head high, his pronged horns curving like pieces of ebony sculpture. Save for the twitching of his old flop ear, he was wholly immobile.

He glimpsed a lone rider, a man creature, and heard a voice sound.

Ted Haines, riding circle for the Flying T, was singing an old range song. Suddenly he pulled up his bronc and froze in the saddle. Only his lips moved as he softly called the name.

"Ramrod! Durned little cuss is still on the job." Ted's grin widened. "Must be gettin' to know our scent. Reckon he knows we tophands don't mean him an' his little fellers no harm."

Now Haines' smile was erased. Shortly the big fall gather would commence, when reps from distant ranches would be on hand. They might not understand that the Flying T outfit had protected Ramrod and his antelope band. And now that the band grazed on grass in the topland range, their meat would provide an excellent change from the steady diet of beef.

Haines shook his head a bit sadly. "I'll do my best for you, Ramrod," he said, "but you'd best watch yore own steps some. Right now I could throw down an' pick you off right between the eyes if'n I had a Winchester."

Haines had made the slightest movement and in a flash, like a blur of dun and white shadow, the little king buck had reared and wheeled. Before any hunter could have pulled a rifle from its boot, he was gone—lost in a thicket.

Ted Haines' grin returned. "Fastest little

critter on four hoofs," he declared. "Luck to you, Ramrod! May them lightning feet never let you down!"

Turning, he rode into the nearby brush. He spoke softly as he hazed a mother cow and her youngling along.

"One of these times, you're goin' to fall asleep an' a lobo or a pair of sneakin' kiyotes are goin' to snatch yore little dogie right from under yore nose."

Animals, especially the wild creatures, such as Ramrod, Old Lady and the band, fascinated Haines. He killed game life only when absolutely necessary for food, and the boys of the Flying T had always respected his desire to protect rather than to destroy the diminishing band of antelope.

But on the wide range there were men who had no such scruples, who had fewer scruples than many of the forest predators. Ted Haines had applied for a game Warden's badge of office, but so far his application had not been accepted.

He shrugged. He could only hope for the best for Ramrod and the little king buck's charges. Ramrod was capable. Many were the time he had saved himself and his kindred by his alertness, speed and cunning, but Haines recalled an old saying printed in gold letters on the wall of his first schoolhouse down in Utah. "*The Pitcher That Goes Too Often To The Well Might Get Broken.*"

So it was, he thought and opined, with Ramrod: The little king buck could not be expected to go on forever guarding his band, defending them against increasing enemies. He would continue to practice all his wiles in their behalf and in his own defense. He would go on to meet the challenges of young, strong bucks who sought to take over his chieftainship.

FOR SEVERAL days, the weather gods had been sullen and brooding, with hot nights slashed by shuddering displays of ghostly lighting.

Tonight, as he blinked at the lightning, Ramrod was restive. He stomped his four hoofs sharply and from time to time blew shrilly from his fluted nostrils. More than ever his injured flop ear worked up and down and his body gave off a strong musky, fetid scent.

A terrific chain of lightning cut its bonds to arouse the lethargic thunder gods, and

the little king buck took a few mincing steps forward to flank his chief consort, Old Lady. They stood poised together, their great, expressive eyes reflecting the savage lights.

It was at this time that the entire coyote family decided to steal in for an attack.

Through a wild sagebrush flat they crept like silent shadow forms. Sa, the father of the litter of seven, was with the family this evening. His mate had called him in, for powerful intuition of her wild kind had prompted her to sense that the little antelope band would be in a state of complete nervousness from the tension of the approaching storm. The coyotes had the wind in their favor. Ramrod and every member of his band stood, heads high, noses directly into the sharpening northwesterly.

Suddenly Ramrod started. From the northwest there sounded the shrill staccato yapping of a single coyote.

Sa, the big dog coyote, had planned the attack well. A single member of his family had gone wheeling wide around the antelope band to arrest the attention of Ramrod and his kindred. Thus, between the grumbling thunder of the gathering storm, he pierced the night with his shrill yaps and yodels.

Back at the band Old Lady half wheeled, snorting, but the little king buck stood his ground. His injured ear has ceased its flopping—a sign that he had control of every sense. His head was erect and cocked slightly as he listened for other coyote voice sounds.

The wailing of the original coyote seemed not to disturb him. What Ramrod's keen mind worked with was a search for answering calls. He had lived too long on coyote range not to understand that a single coyote seldom attempted to run down an antelope. Save in the case of stealing up on a fawn, or cripple, the coyotes hunted in pairs, in relay style.

Suddenly the old doe whirled, whistling shrilly. She almost knocked against Ramrod. He thrust at her but she slid by.

Ramrod reared and wheeled, bounding to cut her off. His eyes now flashing sharp lights of savagery, reflecting also the sharp flashes of lightning, he struck at the doe, rocking her back. Then, with lightning speed, he leaped high, whorled in mid-leap and chopped down to face the east.

With the wind dead against him, he could pick out no sign of danger, yet instinctively he realized that the lone coyote wailing off in the distance was a decoy.

Signalling sharply to Old Lady, he whipped about and struck off, heading into the northwest, directly in the path of the approaching storm. But the big doe, in her advanced age, unwisely gave no relay of his signal to the band. At her back crept eight killers—eight hungry coyotes whose pads cracked no twig, whose scent was blasted swiftly away on the sharpening wind.

A mile westward, a fiendish flash of forked lightning stopped Ramrod in his tracks. The attendant clap of thunder was terrifying. He whirled, whistling, calling, but there was no response from any member of his band. Now a faint rustling of nearby scrub arrested his attention and in a succession of lightning flashes he glimpsed a lone coyote.

Inflamed with anger, the king buck rose and charged. But the son of Sa was agile and whipped to one side as Ramrod overshot.

But Sa's son lacked wisdom. He whipped sharply over a low hummock and his fangs gleamed in the bright lights as he struck at one of the king buck's hamstrings. Ramrod whipped about in his tracks. His head was low, and suddenly it hooked savagely upward. A terrible curved prong punctured skin and flesh as Ramrod spun the gray shape from him.

He stomped in, but the young coyote, wounded, retreated in sidewise fashion as the blood soaked into his fur. Soon he would drop to his belly, blowing sharply, for the deadly tine of the Ramrod's ebony horn had severed a main blood vessel.

Now snuffling the dread tang of blood scent from his nostrils, the handsome king buck wheeled and minced delicately about a small clearing. His band should have been well up on his heels, but there was still no sign of them. Old Lady had refused his signalled directions.

As the storm intensified, Ramrod tossed his head and stomped his hoofs in anger. Out of his turbulent brain came control—control which dictated and guided his actions.

He leaped a low bush and broke into his magnificent bounding stride, headed

back for his old range, but veering widely. Ramrod required the help of a crosswind. When he got it, it blew to his nose the scent of death.

There was blood on the range—the blood of marauder coyote and of antelope. Grunting savagely, the king buck stretched his stride toward the grim amphitheatre where shortly he flanked the gallant Old Lady in her lone stand. She struck swiftly at the great Sa, but swiftly at her rear streaked Sa's mate and a strong young son.

RAMROD bounded forward, making thick guttural throat sounds. He lowered his head and scooped at an elusive coyote.

Old Lady was down on her haunches, a hamstring severed as Ramrod, with all his fighting prowess and savagery, went into action against heavy odds.

One of the young bucks of the antelope band responded to the king buck's signals. For the most part, the band had broken and ran fearfully in all directions as scattered individual units.

Never in all his wild range life had the Ramrod been so hard-pressed in battle. He was at this season of the year approaching the full majesty of his superb physical condition: his curved pronged horns were polished and as hard as flint, throughout his body flowed hot blood feeding well-developed muscles and sinews.

But here, on every quarter in the madly slashed night, white-fanged killers harassed him—rushing, cutting, slashing, forcing him to forget his fear and to throw his every ounce of reserve energy, speed and strategy into the fray.

The little king buck, too, could have run and quickly outdistanced the fleet Sa and his kind, but Ramrod could hear in lulls between thunder crashes, the plaintive grunts of his chief consort, Old Lady. Never again would she stand guard and send danger signals to her king.

In a mad splash of vicious lightning, Ramrod eyed the adult coyotes stealing in, fanwise, to attack him. He skillfully feinted a thrust at the coyote and then whirled and his horns hooked savagely at Sa's mate.

Ramrod pressed his advantage over the she coyote. She was heavy and sinuous and even though his horn tines had punctured her flesh, she squirmed and Ramrod felt her

terrible fangs tear his muzzle. With a grunt he flung up his head, gave a terrific shake and sent a horribly disembowelled shape hurtling into the brush.

When the storm, with terrifying suddenness, crashed in full fury, Ramrod half buckled. Sa, the coyote leader, watching for an opening, had taken advantage of Ramrod's preoccupation to strike from behind. Ramrod's speed saved him. Though he half went down, he leaped prodigiously, snatching his partly severed hamstring from the jaws of his enemy.

He wheeled, quivering, but still challenging. Sa had crippled him and Ramrod was now forced to call up the last reserve unit of his fighting power—bluff.

He snorted, flung his head widely. He fainted, backing the big dog coyote off, but wisely turning against a heavy clump of alders to avert attack from the rear.

Eyes ablaze in the flashing lights, Ramrod stood, his weakened ear beginning to flop up and down. Sa's sharp ears pricked forward and his neck stiffened. From the north came the bawl of cattle and added thunder from stampeding hoofs.

Then came man voice sounds.

Sa shook the rain from his coat and whirled. The storm had precipitated the cattle to stampede. They were threshing through the brush country and Ramrod, the king buck, limped painfully off to westward heading directly into the slanting rain. At last in a small belt of spruces he flopped to rest. His brain was afire and he stretched his lower jaw on the cool sod and leafmould while the rain cooled his fevered body and injured rear limb.

No longer did he hear any specific sound. All the wilds was now smothered in the roar of crashing thunder to which was added the drum of pounding hoofs and rain. Ramrod had fought his greatest battle against terrific odds and now required rest. There was still left burning in his brain cells that flicker of desire—desire to swiftly recover, to mend his wound and then start out in search of the remnants of his scattered band.

Now and then, faintly, he caught the tang of man scent. But now while the storm gods raged, the little king buck blinked his eyes and slowly stretched his wounded limb. Battle-weary, he closed his eyes and succumbed to the overwhelming force of utter

exhaustion, and quickly went to sleep.

Sunrise burst through the drenched foliage, bejewelling the autumn-tinted hinterland, but the Ramrod made no sign of stirring save that now and then he flicked some wet herbage with his tongue.

The thunder gods had long since rumbled off. In the small spruce belt haven, a thrasher sang—his liquid notes arousing all other bird life. Comforting sounds to the little king buck.

All was at peace on the range. He could catch no voice sound from the cattle range. Nearby, a swollen creek aroused his interest and he stiffly rose to his feet, sinking back sharply on his injured leg. Ramrod tossed his head defiantly and slowly stretched the wounded member determinedly back, grunting at the pain. He lowered his hoof gently to the ground and tested it by placing his full weight on it. Soon he went limping to the creek, wading in almost up to his shoulders, where he drank while the rushing cool water soaked his injured leg and wounded muzzle.

Nature had imbued her creatures with an uncanny, instinctive power to heal their own wounds. Ramrod was washing his wounds, cleansing them with running water.

When at last satisfied, he turned and minced out to the bank. He moved on until he reached the juncture of an old dry wash and the main creek. He followed the draw up to a dripping swamp, a place of mossy sludge and muck. Here, for some time, he stood in silence, while the moss healed his wounds.

Out on the dry ground again he nibbled eagerly on soft herbage and grass.

Thus for several days in solitude, he hugged closely the fringes of the isolated swamp.

But now he began to exercise more. He made a few high jumps, but when he came down, his weakened limb buckled. He moved cautiously back to his old range, his nose quivering as he searched wind in every quarter for sign of his kindred.

It was close to dusk at last when the old king buck caught the timorous call of a young doe, scarcely more than a yearling. He blew a sharply whistled call as he broke into a run.

Shortly he had fetched up with the depleted band. The young doe bounded to his side, but he nudged her from him. Ramrod

was back as king of his herd, however few its remaining numbers.

A young buck snorted and stomped his forehoofs. Ramrod turned and glared. He took a few short steps forward as the youngster advanced.

The yearling lowered his head and rushed, and as he suddenly hooked up his horns, the wise Ramrod half buckled at the forelegs. Almost down on his knees, the old king thrust sharply upward and his terrible ebony horns lunged and dug. The belligerent youngster was spilled, toppling on to his side. Not seriously hurt, he quivered from shock as he scrambled to all fours.

Before he could gain complete recovery the little king buck rushed, head down, his eyes spilling terrible flame.

The youngster backed off into the deep scrub and for some time remained in solitude, returning at last to the band at dusk, then to keep his distance, well clear of the stomping Ramrod.

IT WAS again Sa and the remnant members of the coyote band which almost undid the surgery Ramrod had administered. But at the first threat of coyote attack he ran his escape race with valiance. He spurned the torture of a re-torn ligament, as the coyote pack gave chase. Ramrod carried his frightened band off in a long run as he searched for sign of man or cattle. At last he was rewarded by the scent of man and cattle and the acrid tang of buffalo-chip smoke.

A handsome young two-year-old doe had attached herself as his running mate. She had come out of hiding, a stray from some distant band. Her presence inspired the gallant king buck as he bounded higher than any of his fellows as he swung his head from side to side to catch glimpses of his pursuers.

Dawn brought him close in on the frightening blended scents. Ramrod had brought his almost spent band close up with the big fall roundup camp. He had long since looked to the cattle and some of the man creatures as his protectors, but he also instinctively feared them.

Ramrod came to a sharp halt as he saw two man creatures on horseback. He turned and limped off, the doe still almost hugging his flank. The scent of the men set up a shuddering quiver throughout her body and

she called softly, muttering as if in appeal to Ramrod for protection.

One of the cowhands suddenly spotted the antelope pair and jerked a carbine from its saddle boot. Here, close in, was fresh meat which old Biscuits Mason the cook would welcome at the chuckwagon.

Swinging in the saddle, the tophand threw down, and before his riding pardner was aware of the target he had fired.

It was then Ted Haines moved, but it was too late. He saw a dun and white form of the sleek antelope doe, topple back dead. He half swung and watched Ramrod struggle to reach a patch of brush cover.

Haines whirled his bronc and yelled as his companion swung to line his sights on the king buck. He crowded his bronc in close and struck the Winchester barrel down.

"That was a miserable coyote thing to do, Cowley!" he yelled. "Sock that Winchester back into its boot an' shuck yore sixgun. I'll tear you apart."

Haines dismounted, his face twisted as he faced his companion circle rider. But Cowley sat his saddle. He had never seen his friend Haines like this.

"Looks like you're askin' for a heap of trouble, feller," he said. "When has it been ag'in the law to kill antelope for the chuck wagon? Never knowed the day yet when a cowhand hadn't the right to shoot hisself a mess of fresh meat, so long as he wasn't rustlin' cattle stock. You been eatin' loco weed?"

"It's wrong to shoot any of this particular little pronghorn band always, Cowley," Haines said, "Mebbe you don't know the hell them little antelopes have come through this last while. You've mebbe shot the on'y remaining doe in Ramrod's band."

"Ramrod, Haines?" Cowley's forehead was wrinkled. He still couldn't figure it.

Ted Haines was fighting mad and yet he realized that Cowley, a comparative stranger to this particular range, could not be expected to know and understand Ramrod. Ted forced a grin.

"Sorry I sounded off like a spooked brush steer," he said. Then he went on to give his companion a history of the diminishing band of antelope. He spoke especially of Ramrod, the little king buck, and of Ramrod's gallant efforts to maintain the band. He then produced a badge which had

been sent to him in the last week's mail.

"I could a'most toss you in the calaboose for shootin' that doe, Cowley," he said, grinning wider, "but we'll let it go. You just didn't savvy, like I did. From now on I'm takin' on double duty ridin' circle or cuttin'. I'm ridin' herd on Ramrod's band until that little king buck is all healed up an' able to carry on alone. I'd admire to have you lend a hand. You could pass the word around the rest of the hands. Keno?"

Cowley shifted a cud of tobacco from one cheek to the other.

"Keno, Haines. I feel a'most like a dang bushwhacker. Glad you were along because it's time some of us re'alized that we'd be doin' a favor to ourselves an' the—uh—well the whole wild range if'n we weren't so anxious to throw down on ever' deer or antelope we see. Especially these little pronghorn critters. I—Lookit!" He half swung. Haines was forking his bronc again and now turned.

Haines saw the little king buck painfully limping about his band, gathering them into a circle. Beyond, as he raised his glance, he glimpsed a pair of lurking coyotes, belly down on a sagebrush flat.

"Kiotes, Haines!" Cowley said sharply. "Must've been them run the pronghorns in on us! Let's go take 'em, huh?"

Haines nodded as he settled both feet firmly in the stirrups and wheeled his bronc. Both riders fanned out, their horses' hoofs drumming sharply.

On the sage flat Sa, the big coyote leader, suddenly sprang erect and made a signal to his companion. But before they could bound to cover, guns crashed. Sa leaped high, to flop stone dead. His companion, whom Ted Haines had hit from long range with a .45, staggered shakily into a patch of buck brush, there to die.

Cowley swung and grinned at his friend.

"Reckon you squared yoreself with Ramrod, feller," Ted said softly. "Now we might as well go in an' skin out that doe."

For two weeks, as the great moon glowed like a huge orange ball over the rolling horizon, Ramrod limped along, always within short range of the moving cattle herd which daily increased in number. In the nights he whistled and stomped his signals, and the cavy nighthawk, learned to understand the sounds. They would report to Ted Haines at dawn.

Haines received the welcome news with a grin. Not always was he able to keep in near contact with the pronghorn band, but



Haines blasted at the coyote. . . .

always he was sure that some tophand rep was ready to lend assistance to Ramrod and his kindred.

Then one evening Ramrod was restless. He jumped high and came solidly down on all fours, for no apparent reason, save that he wanted to test out his recovered strength and agility.

But now on the freshening evening breeze came the scent of a big rival buck, an alien, who had tracked up the two new does in Ramrod's band. It was this scent that charged Ramrod's whole being with a passionate desire for battle action.

He tanged the man scent, too, but though he quivered, he had recently learnt that the men would do him no harm. He had glimpsed them riding in close, in full view.

It was tonight that Ted Haines rode again with Cowley, watching an old draw down which cattle could escape from the main herd.

The sudden sharp sound of clashing horns brought Ted Haines up short. He signalled to Cowley, who nudged his bronc in close. Together, they dismounted and crept silently through a belt of scrub thicket, until suddenly Haines laid a hand on his companion's arm.

"It's—it's him, Cowley—Ramrod," he whispered. "He's in battle action, boy. Just hang an' rattle an' watch close. We've got the wind with us. But be ready with yore six to throw down if'n that stranger buck seems to be gettin' the best of it. I ain't lettin' no man, no critter, kill off Ramrod, if'n I can stop him."

Hunkered down, the tophands watched. They watched a fury of battle action such as neither had witnessed before.

(Continued on page 129)

HOLSTER BASIN'S LAST

Shattered, beaten and bloody, Jim Douglas as a living dead man would fit well into the Tolliver's scheme to whiplash Holster Basin into slavery . . . For that human reminder of hell could beat those honest ranchers to their knees quicker than could a cold corpse in a closed-in coffin. But Jim Douglas was too damned square to let himself live a lie like that. . . .

—A Tense Novel of a Rangeland Pistol Purge—



PISTOL-PATRIOT By D. B. NEWTON

Chapter I

KILLER WOLVES OF HOLSTER BASIN

JIM DOUGLAS was sleeping fitfully as the clanging of the cell door roused him. A voice said, "Come on! Get up from there!"

Barrel-chested, black of beard, tarnished sheriff's star hanging at a crazy angle to

King Sewalt rode at Douglas,
gun-arm sweeping down in a
glistening arc. . . .



the front of his open vest, Lake Tolliver stood glaring down at the prisoner. Boyd and Rupe, two of Lake's sons who served as deputies, had crowded into the tiny cell behind him; the third, Nathan, lounged in the corridor outside. All four of the big Tollivers had looks of brutal amusement on their heavy features.

"I said get up!" ordered the sheriff a second time.

Douglas made it with an effort. His head spun with weakness and when he swung his legs off the hard cot and came to a sitting position, he thought his empty belly would cave him in the middle. But he got his feet on the floor and pushed up from the steel frame of the cot with shaky arms.

As soon as he was on his feet, big Rupe Tolliver hit him a slogging blow in the middle and he dropped back again, lay twisting, retching, the muscles of all his limbs unstrung and helpless.

"What's the matter, bud?" grinned big Boyd Tolliver. "Hungry?" He was eating an apple. Through blurred eyes Douglas watched the horsey yellow teeth tear into its white meat, watched the juice runnel down Boyd's bearded jaw as the man chewed deliberately, taunting him. Jim Douglas had eaten absolutely nothing in the four days of his confinement here in Basin's jailhouse, at the same time that he was exposed to the cruel beatings of his guards. Now he tried not to look at that apple but it held his pinched gaze with cruel fascination.

Then the sheriff leaned, twined thick fingers into the prisoner's shirt collar and hauled him to his feet. "Stand up when I tell you to!"

Jim Douglas locked his knees to keep them from buckling. He stood there, shoulders rounded, that sickening knot of pain in his belly and hatred in the hot stare he put on his captors. But he said nothing, waiting for one of them to hit him again.

Lake Tolliver stepped back, shoved a meaty thumb toward the open door. "That strawberry roan of yours is tied out front of the jail," he said. "Your gun and belt's

hangin' on the peg there, beside your hat. Take 'em and get out of the Basin. Get out fast!"

Douglas' brain, groggy as it was, could hardly credit what he heard. The sheriff grinned at the look of him. He said: Yeah, we're actually turning you loose. This is the Eleventh of the month—last night was the Tenth. That mean anything to you?"

"The meeting!" said Douglas, dully. "It's over?"

"Right. A big one, too—these small-fry Basin ranchers were all primed, after the buildup the *Courier'd* been giving it. The lot of 'em turned out to hear the speech about the new State Cattleman's Association—only, somehow, the Association gent that was to do the talkin' never showed up. Damn queer, ain't it? The folks is all disgusted, and the leaders don't know what their next move is.

"Well," he added heavily. "*You're* next move is to ride—while we're in a mood to let you!"

Jim Douglas put a slow look around at all the meaty, ugly faces. There was still nausea in his belly from Rupe's sledging blow. He said heavily: "You Tollivers! There's nothing you think you can't get away with—even to using the county jail to hold your own private prisoners while you starve and torture them!"

Lake shrugged. "It was dark when we nailed you coming in on the Basin road four days ago, and fetched you down here and locked you in. No one knows you've been here—not even the damn fools that invited you to come. And there's nothing they or you can do about it—not when this Basin and everybody in it belongs to the Tollivers. No fly-by-night Cattleman's Association is going to take it away from us!"

"Don't be too sure!" said Jim Douglas. "We're not a fly-by-night outfit. There's money behind us, and organization, and the will of all the free and independent cowmen of the State."

Lake Tolliver sneered. "I'm scared stiff! Remember this—what you've had was just a sample. The next time you or any other Association man dares to show his nose around the Basin he'll get more than solitary and a few days without grub! Savvy? You ain't wanted here!"

"We are wanted," said Douglas. "By the ranchers who sent for me and met last night

to hear me talk. *They* want us bad."

"Go on! Get going before I let Rupe work on you again—someplace where it'll show, this time!"

Big Rupe gave an animal grunt. He said, "This guy's face is too pretty, Paw. Lemme just fix it up for him a little."

Jim Douglas stared at him coldly. "I may have to kill you someday, Rupe," he muttered, still feeling the nausea that fist-blow had put into his belly. Before Rupe could make any reply he turned and went shakily out of the cell.

HE TOOK his hat from the peg, dragged it on. The shells had been taken out of his gun, but he strapped it in place about his lean hips and, through the dusty window of the office, saw his roan standing at the hitch rack in the sun smitten street. Saddle and gear were piled on and ready for the trail. He grunted, "At least you saw fit to feed my bronc."

"Aw, yeah!" growled the sheriff. "We got no war against a good hoss!" He pointed up the street, to a pineclad hill that made the Basin's northern rim. "That's the quickest way out. Don't waste no time takin' it."

They were sure of themselves, these Tollivers. Two of the brothers—Rupe and Nathan—followed Douglas outside and stood in the shadow of the arcade, watching with thumbs hooked in shell belts as he went to his mount and flung back saddle leather to test the cinches. They were very sure that their threats and their beatings and a four-day starvation treatment had taken the fight out of this Association man. And they were very nearly right!

Weakness and hunger had him so shaky now that it was all he could do to find stirrup and strength enough and haul himself up into the saddle. Jim Douglas sat there a moment, fighting the weak dizziness that was in him. Then he took the reins, spoke to his bronc; and the animal started up the street at a walk, the eyes of the Tollivers following. Any misstep, Douglas knew, and their guns would be out and blasting him from saddle.

With food under his belt, he thought, he would have stood up to any of that brusier family, although there wasn't a one that didn't top him by half a head and best him twenty pounds of brawn and muscle. But

the course of deliberate starvation to which they had subjected him, and the beatings Rupe administered, had him whipped—physically and spiritually. There wasn't anything left in him that would prevent him riding out of this town and this Basin as they had ordered, tail between his legs.

Except for the small vista of weedgrown lot which the narrow-barred cell had given him, this was Douglas' first look at the town since four nights ago when he was brought in, trussed and gagged and doubled across his saddle. A half block along and across the street, he saw now the squat, clapboard shop that housed the Basin *Courier*. As he came abreast of it a thin young man in shirtsleeves was sweeping out the place; and on the impulse Douglas reined over toward him. He said, "Got a match, mister?"

The man turned, leaned on his broom as he frowned suspiciously at the other's pinched, hunger-gaunted features. He must have noticed that this stranger had no quirky fashioned, no apparent need for a match. But canting his broom against the wall, he shrugged then and came out to the edge of the sidewalk, digging in pants pocket.

Back in front of the jail, Rupe and the other Tolliver giant had started forward as they saw Douglas come to a halt. Jim said quickly: "You the editor of this paper? You George Brooks?" And at the other's nod: "I'm Douglas, of the Cattleman's Association."

The man blinked as this hit him, but before he could stammer an answer Jim Douglas added, quickly: "Don't try to talk here—it's not safe. But if you can, meet me out on the trail an hour from now. And I'd appreciate it if you'd bring some food!"

Without waiting for answer, he kicked his horse with spurless heels, to ride on, and at that instant one of the Tolliver boys unloosed a shot.

It was meant as a warning. It gouted up dust close to the hoofs of the strawberry roan and the animal, frightened, fidgetted and bucked a little. But this was too much for Douglas; too weak to hold the saddle, he was sliding out of it sidewise. As he fell he struck heavily against the cross pole of a hitch rack fronting the *Courier* office. He rolled over the bar, thudded half-conscious upon the sharp edge of the plank walk.

Douglas was trying to get to his feet when he felt George Brooks' hands helping him up strongly. He shook his head. "Better stay out of this! Those Tollivers will have your hide!"

But he heard Brooks curse; and despite the protest, the newspaperman was helping him across the walk, guiding his footsteps as he stumbled over the threshold into the half-gloom of the print shop, pungent with the odor of printer's ink. Brooks let the starved man into a chair and then he whirled again toward the door and Douglas saw him reach quickly for a gun and belt that lay on a paper-littered desk.

With an effort Jim Douglas roused himself and dragged his own gun out of holster, broke open the gate, feeding shells into the empty cylinder with fumbling, shaky hands. Outside, the newspaperman was standing spreadlegged, now, belt and holster in one hand, gun leveled in the other. "Stay back, you Tollivers!" he shouted. "Don't come any nearer!"

But they were not staying back. They were closing in on him, tramping through street dust in their heavy cowhide boots, a catlike wariness in the set of their huge bodies. Sheriff Lake Tolliver and his third son had come out of the jailbuilding by this time, to join the other two. And all along the wide street, Basin's citizens were making for cover as they saw the Tolliver clan moving into action.

Lake's bull voice boomed across the stillness: "Keep out of this, Brooks! That gent has his riding orders! You'd better not interfere!"

"That's Gawd's truth!" added Nathan Tolliver. "We been easy on you, up to now. We let you alone in spite of the things you've printed about us in that damn' paper of yours—"

"You've let me alone," retorted George Brooks, "because you were afraid to do otherwise! You knew there were some things even you couldn't get away with! You wouldn't dare touch me or the *Courier*!"

"Afraid?" echoed Lake Tolliver. "Afraid of a skinny runt like you? Dammit, go in and take him, boys! Tear that print shop to splinters—smash his presses and scatter his type like chicken feed in the dust of the street. We'll show that damned yellow-gut who's afraid!"

Chapter II

TALK'S SLOW—LEAD'S FAST!

THEY STARTED forward, daring Brooks' leveled gun. But at that instant another gun spoke. The hat was lifted cleanly from Lake Tolliver's shaggy head, sent scooting across the street, and the big sheriff halted in his tracks with a squawk of alarm. Then, as his three sons hauled up too, the figure of Jim Douglas appeared in the doorway behind Brooks, a smoking weapon held in his hand.

He was still shaky and had to lean against the edge of the door, but his hand had been steady enough to put a neat bullet past Brooks' slight shape and straight through the crown of Lake Tolliver's battered Stetson. Douglas shouted, "stay back—all of you! I won't be aiming for a hat next time!"

The threat stopped them and for a moment they stood like that, four against two, all with guns in their hands but no one wanting to try the first shot.

One of the boys shouted: "Hell, we can't let this happen to us!" But his bluster ran a little thin at the edges and after he had spoken there was silence; it threaded out into the still morning as the last echoes of Douglas' shot battered back and forth and died against the falsefronted lifts of the street's drab, wooden buildings.

Jim Douglas, leaning against the door's edge, braced his gun elbow on one lean hip and wondered how long he could keep from caving. It hurt like hell where the cross bar of that tie pole had smashed into his ribs and empty belly; but he had to stay on his feet, because the newspaperman alone couldn't hold these four badge-wearing toughs . . .

Then a light rig came spinning out of a side street, dust dripping from its wheels. The man holding the reins gave a shout to his team as he reined in yards away from that tense scene. As the dust settled, Douglas saw there were two persons on the high seat of the rig, and one was a girl. The man had the big frame, the dark features of the Tollivers, and something in the girl's dark hair and the set of her shoulders marked her also as a member of the clan. Yet there was a difference between these newcomers, and the sheriff and his

hulking sons; and there was a sharp disgust in the man's voice as he snapped: "Lake! What's going on here?"

The sheriff turned on the newcomers, angrily. "Get back out to the ranch, brother Orrin—I handle things in town. Right now we're gonna strip the hides off a editor and a sneakin' rat of a Cattleman's Association spy!"

"You're gonna do no such thing," snapped the man in the buggy. Orrin Tolliver was older than his brother, with wings of gray at his temples. He was not so huge of frame and there was more of delicacy in the molding of his features. The girl beside him—his daughter, Douglas thought—had a shapely figure and blue eyes under her cloud of tumbled black curls.

"Damn it!" bellowed Lake Tolliver. "I'm sheriff! Don't tell me what I can or can't do!" But all the bluster was running out of him like the air from a punctured balloon, under the steady look of his elder brother. Finally, with a vicious grunt he stabbed his sixgun into holster.

"That's better!" said Orrin Tolliver. "And remember this, Lake: you're sheriff only because the family saw fit to put you in the job. Look out you don't try and get tough just once too often."

Lake glowered but said nothing. "All right," his brother ended. "Now come over to the office. I think we better leave one of the boys in charge there and the rest of you ride back with me to T Square, for a pow-wow with Matt!"

The sheriff only shrugged, turned and started away with his three skulking sons trailing him. Orrin Tolliver spoke to his team and drove on, leaving Douglas and Brooks standing in front of the print shop. The last thing Douglas saw of them was a glimpse of the girl as she glanced quickly behind her. He thought there was concern and trouble reflected in her pretty eyes.

Beside him, George Brooks let out breath in a long stream. "That," said the editor, "was one close call!"

Brooks had bachelor's quarters at the rear of his newspaper shop and here he kicked up a fire in the cook stove and prepared a hasty late breakfast for Jim Douglas. Dark feelings of outrage showed on the newspaperman's face as he heard Jim's recital of the things that had happened to him. "Not eating for four days wasn't too

bad by itself," said Douglas. "But that Rupe is too handy with his fists. He knows where to hit so it'll hurt like the devil but not leave anything to show!"

"Someday," Brooks gritted, "those Tollivers will wake up and find their rule has ended. They'll find they can't get away with this sort of thing forever!"

"How did they ever get such a hold on this Basin, anyway?" asked Douglas.

"By being the first ones here! They drove out the Piutes, made the first steps toward civilizing the place—I'll give them that much credit. But they thought that gave them permanent title to the whole place. They took all the best grass and water for their own T Square spread; then when other men wanted to move in on what was left, the Tollivers assumed jurisdiction over who should come in and who should stay out.

"They handpicked their neighbors; anyone that tried to settle on Basin graze despite their orders was burned out or killed, their cattle rustled. When the country was organized they grabbed off all the offices, either for themselves or their hirelings. I reckon they think God Himself is a Tolliver—or maybe it's the devil they worship!"

BROOKS put steaming coffee and a plate of ham and eggs in front of Jim Douglas. The half-starved Association man had to keep a firm grip as he saw that food, had to restrain himself with a strong hand to keep from gorging. The editor pulled out a chair across the table, and there was sympathy in his eyes as he watched Douglas light in.

The latter felt immediately stronger as the hot coffee and the food hit his empty belly. With the first edge of his hunger removed, he was able to give his mind once more to the things Brooks had been telling him.

"How many Tollivers are there?"

"A slew of them; and their headquarters is the T Square with a ranch house as big as a fortress. Old Matt Tolliver still holds the reins, but the years have crippled him up. He never leaves the ranch any more.

"There's three sons. Orrin, the oldest, manages T Square and will probably take over leadership of the clan when the old patriarch dies. You've already tangled with

Lake and his brats. Finally, there's Simon, who holds the county judgeship and is a complete fool. Add in the cousins and nephews, who followed the Tollivers West and set themselves up under old Matt's wing; among them they run everything in the Basin. I don't know how the crop of grandchildren and great-grandchildren stands at present."

"Who was the girl in the buggy with Orrin?" Jim Douglas heard himself ask.

"That's Kathy, the heiress apparent. Plenty good to look at but as wild and arrogant as any of them."

Douglas frowned. "Orrin Tolliver seemed reasonable enough," he objected. "He held off Lake and the boys when they might have killed us."

"You're mistaken!" Brooks said heavily. "Orrin is no better than the rest—he's just got a bigger share of brains. He, at least, can see that opposition has built up in the Basin over the years; that the *Courier* is the voice of that opposition and if the Tollivers moved openly against it they might be lighting the fuse to blow them all to hell. That's the reason—and the only reason—he made them go easy today."

Considering all this, Jim Douglas finished eating before he spoke again. Then, pushing back his plate with a sigh of satisfaction, he reached for the makings as he said:

"I better state my own position clearly. As a representative of the new State Cattleman's Association, I hold no interest in local feuds or in anything else except selling the Association to the ranchers, by talking to them and showing them its advantages. Maybe I've got a personal score now to settle with Lake and his boys; but officially my aim is not to stir up trouble, but to help prevent it—by signing up members for the Association, bringing its weight to bear in the settling of brand or boundary disputes, and offering the services of trained range detectives in the recovery of rustled stock."

"Right there, friend," exclaimed the newspaperman, "you touch our sorest point! For the past six months, the ranches of Holster Basin have been losing stock regularly. That south wall—" he pointed toward a barren rim of rock that showed through the kitchen window "—is as full of holes as a sieve; it's practically impossible to track a herd once it's gone through into the malpais beyond.

"The Tollivers, with all their talk and their self-assumed role as feudal barons and protectors of the Basin, have been unable to stop this rustling; and yet they're too jealous of their power to allow the Association, or any other outside organization, to come in and help—they know it would be the first opening wedge in the shattering of their prestige.

"But meanwhile, there's many a small rancher who will be doomed unless something effective is done. That's why we sent for you, Mr. Douglas," the newspaperman went on. "That's why we counted so heavily on hearing you last night at the meeting. When you failed to show up we more than suspected that the Tollivers must have gotten to you. Some of the leaders are gathering this afternoon at Walt Rand's Circle R spread, near the south of the Basin. And then at four o'clock, we're meeting."

Jim Douglas nodded, pushed back his chair and rose. "Count on me being there," he said.

George Brooks frowned. "A lot could happen between now and four o'clock. You better lie low! If the Tollivers should get their hands on you again—"

"I'm not hiding out from a Tolliver or any other man," said Douglas firmly. "In fact, I'm going to make my next call at T Square!"

"The Tolliver's own stronghold? Are you crazy?"

Douglas shrugged. "It's just that I've got a hunch about this Orrin Tolliver. Seems to me he's the kind of man I could talk to; and if there's a chance of words selling him on the Association it's a bet I don't want to overlook. After all," he pointed out, smiling, "I'm supposed to be a salesman—a pretty good one, according to the way the Association thinks."

"But damn it!" cried Brooks. "If you walk right into their hands, a bullet will stop your talking before it's even had a chance to begin!"

"Possibly. It's a risk I've got to take. If T Square's been losing cattle and can't do anything to stop it, even a Tolliver ought to see they can only benefit by the Association giving them a hand with the problem. And don't worry," he added, dragging on his hat. "I'll be at Circle R, and on time. That's a promise!"

Chapter III

PISTOL PATRIARCH OF HOLSTER BASIN

T SQUARE headquarters was just what the *Courier* editor had called it—a fortress. Built to stand against Piute attacks, the house, with heavy log walls pierced by narrow slits of windows, looked down upon the Basin from among its tight cluster of ranch buildings, at the tip of a high spur thrust out from the western wall. It commanded a fine view of the rolling Basin acres, and it would be almost impossible for a rider to approach unseen by a Tolliver lookout.

They let Jim Douglas alone as he came up the switchback wagon trail to the promontory. He saw men working at the blacksmith shed, and dust rose from a branding corral where others were moving about amid the stench of burning flesh and the bawl of frightened cattle. But no one challenged him and Jim Douglas rode up to the front of the big, square main building, and hauled in his strawberry roan there.

He sat saddle a moment, looking over the place. Then swung around and went deliberately up broad steps to the deep porch. His hand was lifted to knock at the panel of the thick oaken door, when it swung away from him suddenly and a man stood framed in the opening.

"Come on in, Douglas," Rupe Tolliver grunted. His words were an order, not an invitation. A sixgun was levelled in his huge fist.

Showing nothing on his dark, lean face, Jim Douglas ducked instinctively to clear the low lintel. As he went past Rupe he felt a tug at his gun belt as the weapon was lifted from his holster. He paid no attention. Jim Douglas wanted a chance to talk with this family, and if they would only let him, he was not particular under what conditions they chose to have it.

Behind him, Rupe said: "Straight ahead—through that door."

A dark hall stretched the length of the building. Rupe Tolliver's heavy cowhides clomped along behind Douglas and then the Cattle Association man halted in the doorway looking in upon a room filled with heavy, masculine furniture and holding now a conclave of Tollivers.

Sheriff Lake Tolliver was there, seated in a hide-bottomed chair with his son Boyd leaning thick shoulders against the rough wall behind him. Another man, Jim Douglas guessed, was the Tolliver's judge—Simon—who wore a black clawhammer coat which looked entirely out of place on him. Orrin Tolliver also was present, and over by a narrow, slitlike window, the girl Kathy was watering some potted plants. Jim Douglas' eye switched to her face, held there for long moments by the striking beauty of it.

A sharp and aged voice brought him back to earth. An incredibly old man with white hair and beard and seamed features sat crumpled in a wheel chair. Piercing eyes stared from under shaggy brows at the stranger in the doorway. This, Jim Douglas knew, would be Matt—leader of the clan of Tolliver, and patriarch of Holster Basin. He could feel the burn of the keen old eyes as they raked his lean figure. Matt spoke to Rupe Tolliver, standing behind the newcomer:

"What's the matter with you, boy? Are the Tollivers afraid of one man? Give him back his gun!"

Rupe tried to mutter something, but he swallowed his words and Douglas felt the shove as the gun was put forcibly back into its holster. He didn't touch it, only nodded across the room to the old man, and said, "Thanks."

All of their eyes were on him. Orrin Tolliver, looking at him with a cool, not unfriendly appraisal, told the old man now: "This is the one we've been talking about, The Cattleman's Association agent."

"Yeah," grunted Lake, his hard mouth twisting. "You see what comes of you interfering this morning? I had him all ready to ride out of the Basin. Now I got it all to do over again!"

"Shut up, Lake," snapped the old cripple. "Don't look to me like this gent is much scared, or he wouldn't be walking in on T Square like this." He bobbed his head at the stranger in the door. "Come on in, Mister, and state your business. If you had the nerve to ride here I reckon we might as well listen to you."

Taking off his hat, Jim Douglas moved forward into the room, leaving Rupe Tolliver in the doorway behind him. He ignored the sheriff and the phony judge, and

directed his remarks to Orrin Tolliver and the old cripple.

He said, "I'd like to find out exactly what you know about this new Association—its aims and its methods. I wonder if you really understand what the organization is for?"

"I understand all I need to know!" snapped old Matt Tolliver, shrugging thin shoulders. "I read the editorials in that pipsqueak Brook's newspaper, don't I? It all looks fine in print—till you read between the lines, and then you see that bringing the Association in here is just a sneak move on the part of Brooks and some of the malcontents like Walt Rand. They want to bust up T Square and take our graze and water away from us, push the Tollivers into a back seat in Holster Basin. And by Gad, sir, that's one thing that bunch of small-fry will never succeed in doing!"

STANDING in front of the old man in the wheel chair, Jim Douglas looked down at him coolly. He said in a flat tone: "You're letting your suspicions run away with you! I assure you, the Cattleman's Association is no tool for any self-interested group of men. It aims to serve all men who raise cattle within the confines of this State, by registering their brands, by pooling their resources and their strength. No honest man needs to fear it—and no man is so strong that the organization can't help him."

A snort broke from the heavy lips of the sheriff. "Sounds just like the editorials in the *Courier*!" he grunted. "Man talks purty, don't he?"

"Shut up!" growled old Matt, not even looking at his son, his eyes never wavering from the face of the stranger. "Go on," he told Douglas.

"One of the most important functions of the Association is an insurance against the depredations of rustlers. From dues paid into its treasury it will hire special range detectives—good men, and enough of them to move in and give aid to any member who may be suffering loss of stock." Douglas added, drily: "I understand something of the sort is happening now in Holster Basin. Is that true?"

"We'll have no outsiders—" began Lake Tolliver. A mere look from the old man silenced him this time.

Matt Tolliver said to Douglas:

"Yes, it's true we've been having a lot of trouble. It's impossible to keep all the holes plugged in that south rim, and there's a tough bunch, headed by a varmint named King Sewalt, that's been helping themselves to T Square and every other brand of Basin cattle. So far I admit there's nothing we've been able to do about it. But does that warrant our taking a chance and letting some swarm of gunslingers calling themselves 'range detectives' ride in here, and bust us wide open?" Matt shook his head. "No! It's asking too much, Mr. Douglas!"

And Jim Douglas knew then that he had come hard up against a solid wall of prejudice and suspicion. He looked about him at the other faces in the room and saw confirmation—even the eyes of the girl held cold hostility. Her father and the judge showed the same unyielding suspicion, and there was naked hatred in the stare of the sheriff and his two sons. Jim Douglas shrugged, heavily.

He said, "Well, if that's how you look at it, then I guess I'm wasting my time! I'll be going."

"Or maybe you won't!" said the sheriff.

Turning, Douglas saw big Rupe Tolliver standing, bearlike, blocking the door. Rupe had his gun leveled at Douglas' belt buckle. "Stay where you are!"

No one spoke or moved. Then Douglas' jaw went tight hard. His hands knotted into fists as he started slowly across the hardwood floor, pacing deliberately toward Rupe. The man stood and watched him come, a snarl on his bestial mouth, the muzzle of his gun looking like the opening of a tunnel.

Eyes boring at the larger man, Douglas kept going until he was directly in front of Rupe and with that muzzle almost touching his shirt. Suddenly, not telegraphing the movement by any flicker of his eyes, he chopped quickly at Rupe Tolliver's gun-hand with his left, deflecting the weapon, and at the same instant the Association man's right fist came scorching in with all the power of a muscled shoulder behind it.

That fist sank wrist-deep into Rupe's belly, doubling him forward, whooshing the breath past his bearded lips, and then Douglas' left fist lashed and jerked Rupe Tolliver half around. It was not a knock-out blow but the giant buckled at the knees

and went down, dropping his sixgun. Pivoting on the ball of a foot, Douglas leaned, palmed the weapon. He did not draw his own gun, but Rupe's Colt was rockhard in his grasp as he spun about to face the man behind him. It was the barrel-chested sheriff.

Lake Tolliver had come to his feet. The other son had pushed away from the wall and was groping for a gunhandle. Nathan let his hand fall away from his holster, though, at the menace of the weapon in Douglas' fingers. The rest had not moved, except Kathy Tolliver, who had put one slim hand to her brown throat. She stood now with a bar of light from one of those slit-like windows falling across her glossy hair and delicate face.

Big Rupe was gagging, trying to push up to a sitting position. Jim Douglas told him, "You had that coming! Next time you beat up a prisoner, make sure he isn't going to have a chance to pay you back! You too, Lake," he added, swinging on the sheriff. "Letting a man starve for four days in a cell, without a charge against him, is going pretty far even for a Tolliver!"

The sheriff spluttered something, purple with rage. Douglas passed over the weak face of Judge Simon, who had said not a word during this interview. He looked bleakly at Orrin and old Matt. "I want to know if Lake was working under your orders when he did that?"

"No!" snapped Matt drily. "He's kind of a damn fool, sometimes, when he tries to think for himself. Today was the first time I ever heard about him having you in the jail!"

"I'd like to think you're telling the truth," said Douglas. "I'll believe it for the time being." He nodded curtly. "I'm sorry we couldn't get together about the Association—because I'm afraid you haven't heard the last of it! But this will have to do for now!"

And turning on his heel he went out of the room without another look for any of them, sidestepping the gross body of the groaning Rupe. He went along the long dark hall, out and down the veranda steps, and swung to the saddle of his strawberry roan.

No one made any move to stop him as he took the downward trail and left T Square headquarters.

Chapter IV

COLD STONE TOMB

IT WAS still considerable time before the projected meeting. Jim Douglas found a stock trail angling through broken country along the Basin's southern wall and he took this, knowing it would lead him eventually onto Circle R range. Meanwhile he had his first interested look at this end of the Basin.

As George Brooks had said, it was like a sieve, with eroded gaps breaking the high flat line the rimrock drew against the sky, and with upward-angling ravines chopping the pine-choked lower hills at its base. There were a dozen places at least where stolen stock could be threaded out through the gaps and into tangled badlands beyond.

Once, on crossing a shrunken stream, Douglas saw in its wide border of dried mud the unmistakable traces of old sign of horses and cattle, pointing toward the mouth of one of those ravines. Higher up, the sign would have been lost in shale, but this was mute testimony of the activity of the rustlers whose leader was King Sewalt.

He had ridden perhaps two miles from T Square when a voice hailed him from above. Turning his head, he spotted George Brooks come dropping down out of the timber, looking awkward and out of place in the saddle of the bay gelding he rode. Douglas reined up, wondering, as the newspaperman came in.

"I've been watching the trail," Brooks told him in a clipped tone. "I've been damn worried ever since I let you head for the Tollivers. If you hadn't come along in another quarter hour I would have spread the alarm!"

"No need to worry," said Jim. "I had a little talk with Orrin and old Matt—we couldn't get together, but they didn't make any move to stop me from leaving."

"Well, that's good!" grunted Brooks. And then, casting a quick glance along the needle-littered trail, he asked a rather strange question: "Anybody seen you since you came from there?"

Puzzled, Jim shook his head. "No."

"That's good, too!" said the newspaperman. "All right, friend Douglas!" he added, harshly. "Just put both your hands on the saddlehorn, where I can watch

them." And Brooks let out a flat laugh. "What?" Jim's head whipped around. Then something froze within him as he saw the gun in Brooks' hand, and the strange expression on his face.

"You heard me!" snapped Brooks. "Grab the horn and don't make any funny moves!" And when, reluctantly, Douglas had obeyed, Brooks knee'd his bronc closer and leaned quickly. For the second time that day the gun was lifted from Jim Douglas' holster.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I think so!" Brooks nodded up the slope toward the edge of the timber. "All right, now, take the reins and move up there ahead of me—and just keep going till I tell you to stop! This gun is aching to part your shoulder blades!"

His shoulder muscles tightening where he knew the revolver was centering, Douglas jerked his roan around and sent it upward toward the trees.

He could hear Brooks' mount fighting the slick slope behind him. As he reached the edge of the timber Brooks said, "Keep right ahead." They went straight through the belt of pine, and at the upper edge came out under the sheer towering of gray limestone that formed the southern rim.

Two riders sat saddle waiting for them in the shadow of the rock. They moved forward as Brooks and his prisoner came into view, and one of them—a big, heavy shouldered, dark-visaged man—said, "This the gent?"

"This is the gent, King. We're playing in luck—he says nobody saw him leave there. When I show up at Rand's with his carcass and tell them T Square had the nerve to beef an Association man, it'll have every small rancher in the Basin up in arms and ready to move against the Tollivers."

King Sewalt scowled, dubiously. "I don't think you can take T Square. It's a fortress."

"Maybe so—but it can be burnt! I'll hold off the attack until dark. You and your men will be up on the hill in back of the spread, and there'll be enough excitement to cover you when you slip down and set the kerosene going. We can drive the Tollivers out in the open and shoot them down like ducks! We'll break them all at one blow!"

Fury was flaming uncontrollably in Jim Douglas. "So it's a deep scheme you've been working, Brooks!" he broke out harshly. "Hand in hand with King Sewalt's rustlers—playing the Tollivers against the little ranchers and using me for your prime tool!"

"That's about right," admitted the newspaperman with a grin. "I've been building to this for a year now—ever since the day I moved my presses in and set myself up as spokesman for the opposition! In the new setup I'll be in a position to write my own ticket. I can have anything I want, after helping these folks kick the Tollivers out!"

"You're playing a dangerous game!" gritted Douglas. Brooks laughed shortly. "Sewalt? Why, there'll never be anything to tie me in with him—not even in the doings tonight. With all the shooting going on nobody will have to know he had any part of it, or even that the fire that burns out the Tollivers was set."

Douglas saw the truth of this. "Smart, all right!" he conceded, grudgingly. Added: "But what about the Association? You think you can get around them as easily as you have everyone else?"

"If you don't mind, I'll worry about the Association." Brooks sneered a little. "Frankly, if you're any sample of the kind of men they have, the Association shouldn't give much trouble. You've been very useful, friend—without meaning to be, of course! And now you'll play your last role slung belly-down across a saddle!"

Gunmetal whispered against leather as King Sewalt slipped his weapon out. "Where'll I give it to him?" grunted the outlaw. "Not in the head, if you want enough left of him to identify."

"Hold it, you fool!" George Brooks grabbed the outlaw leaders' gunarm, pulled it down. "A gunshot carries! You'll bring a crowd down on our necks!"

King Sewalt shrugged. "We'll just bash his brains in, then!" And he lunged his bronc straight at Douglas, gunarm sweeping down with the gun barrel a glistening arc.

JIM DOUGLAS ducked instinctively, at the same moment giving a wild yank at the reins. The strawberry roan came up on its hind legs, dancing away from the plum-

meting of King Sewalt's horse. At that instant, despite George Brooks' warning against gunplay, someone's finger cramped trigger. As the gun lashed flatly across the thin, still air, Douglas felt the roan stagger and go down under him.

He kicked free of stirrups, left the saddle and hit the slanted ground rolling. The roan was dead. Unarmed and unhorsed, Douglas had no chance at all. But when he came up to hands and knees he sighted a talus boulder at the foot of the rock wall and went stumbling for it.

He heard Brooks' curse and the gun roared again. Dust streaked off the face of the boulder. Legs pumping, he kept on. When he reached the rock he saw there was no cover there, but yards beyond, a dark vertical crack opened in the face of the steep wall. It would be just large enough for the body of a man. Douglas made for it, seeing one chance of saving himself.

It was the narrowest of slots that pinched out to nothing, after only a few feet. Douglas crammed into it, clawing at the limestone to push himself back as far as possible. There was a slight degree of curvature, so that at the back of the crevice sunlight was shut away. A bullet, unless it ricocheted, would not reach him.

"Come out of that hole, damn you!" King Sewalt's voice cried. Another shot sounded; he heard the smash of the bullet into rock and was stunned by flying chips, but the lead itself was wasted.

"Stop shooting!" shouted George Brooks. "Do you want the whole Basin up here?"

"I'll go in and drag him loose!" the outlaw grunted.

"There isn't time!" Brooks' voice held a note of hysteria. "We got to be pulling out of here, quick!"

"Mitch, you stick around—keep out of sight in the trees and watch this hole. That damn fool sure as hell can't get away. You can either pick him off when he comes out, or let him starve to death. Meanwhile, we'll go ahead with our plans. I can make those ranchers believe my story. King, have your men ready, come dark."

"All right," growled Sewalt. "You've got your orders, Mitch!"

"Until tonight then—at T Square," said Brooks. "Now, let's hit saddle!"

Douglas heard the crunch of boots as the men moved across broken shale to where

they had left their horses. Squeezed into darkness, trapped there with the cleft wall of the rock seeming about to crush him, he felt the hard stone bite into him, felt the sweat start out on his body. He might as well have been in his own tomb as caught like this, weaponless, with Mitch waiting for him outside!

For some time now there had been no further sound. The shots had drawn no investigation after all—a thing which might have given Douglas a small chance. His guard had withdrawn into the shelter of the trees where he would be less conspicuous if a rider appeared on the little-used trail below. A deep silence settled in—an agonizing suspense of waiting.

Muscles cramped, the prisoner in the rock hardly dared to breathe for fear that, at any moment, the slow-thinking Mitch might tire of his vigil and start plugging away at some sound or movement. Yet time passed and there was nothing—only silence, and the damp chill of the rock seeping into his body.

If he could manage somehow to wait out the remaining hour or two of daylight, he reasoned, darkness might give him some hope of escaping with his life. But darkness would also bring the attack on T Square. There was no possibility of giving warning.

He had to hold on to his nerve, hang on and wait.

Nightfall came early, here at the foot of the Basin's high south rim. The higher ramparts were still washed in gold when the man trapped in the knife-cleft figured the shadows might be deep enough to try a break. He knew his cramped body and tautened nerves could not stand another quarter hour of this manbreaking seclusion. With infinite caution, Douglas began moving out.

As he eased around the curve in the wall, darkness swallowed him up. A chill night wind curled around him. He moved into the clear inch by inch, sidling along the wall, feeling his way with great pains. If he gave any kind of warning, he was lost.

It took him twenty minutes to move the half dozen feet to the opening, and when he paused there his body was drenched with cold and clammy sweat. He was shaking. He pressed flat against the rock within the entrance, listening, and trying to get the

picture in his mind of just exactly what lay outside—

And then he lunged free, hurling himself down and to one side.

His desperate hope was to ride under the first bullet and after that somehow keep moving, keep away from searching lead until he found cover of some kind. The moment he appeared a gun boomed—but not from the trees. With the coming of darkness the guard had left his post and had moved in closer, and the shot came from directly in front of Douglas, the sting of the bullet fanning him as it passed. Desperately, Douglas plunked ahead, knowing his only desperate chance lay in close-in grapple.

He heard a curse break from Mitch as the man back-pedalled. The gun spoke again, and the shot was wild. Jim Douglas' shoulder struck against the man's middle. The barrel of the weapon came down, furrowing his scalp, tearing at his ear. He took the force of the blow on the point of a shoulder. After that both men went crashing down into the shale and Douglas was trying frantically to get a grip on the hand that held the gun.

He found it, lost it, got it again. Then they were struggling for possession of the gun, hard fists raining blows. Mitch was a slim, slight figure, wiry as a wildcat. His knee took Douglas in the groin and as the latter dropped back Mitch tore loose from him, rolled away and then came up in a crouch.

With a huge effort Douglas went after him, got him around the waist. As he dragged the man down he drove a crooked elbow hard into the gunman's face. He felt the nose smash from under the blow. A grunt of pain broke from Mitch. As Douglas struck him again, the man went completely limp beneath him and lay without moving.

Panting, Douglas pushed erect and stood there over the motionless figure. He got the fallen gun, and straightened with it in his hand.

Across the Basin, the high parapets of the northern rim had lost the last of their color. Night was flowing like heavy smoke into the cup.

And, at that moment a rattle of gunfire came to him, carried on the rising wind from the direction of T Square.

Chapter V

SMOKE-OUT!

HE DROVE Mitch's bronc furiously in the young night, and the sound of firing grew steadily. Then, as that stock trail brought him sweeping around finally into view of the Tolliver's ranch headquarters, he could see the spitting of the guns.

He could see something else too—something that flooded him with sudden horror.

The whole rear wall of the ranch house was already a burning sheet of hellish flame, black smoke smouldering up into the cold night sky. King Sewalt's outlaws had done a thorough job of firing the ranch. The Tollivers were forced up inside the house, answering the surrounding gunfire of the small Basin ranchers. But a moment longer and the T Square men would have to abandon their stronghold, would have to come pouring out into the blazing firelight where the cold bullets of their enemies would pick them off.

And when they did, among them would come a helpless old cripple in a wheel chair—and a slender darkhaired girl!

Jim Douglas groaned. He had only moments, and there was one way he could get up there—by the switchback wagon road, straight through the Basin ranchers. Shipping Mitch's captured gun, he kicked the bronc and sent it forward. It took the mounting loops of the trail with strong pounding hoofs. The house grew larger before him, outlined now by the leap of hungry flames above its roof.

Someone challenged him, and a bullet breezed past his ear as a Basin man took him for a Tolliver. Douglas didn't slow the labored gallop of his mount. He kept right on, through the ranks of the attackers. He knew the name of only one of them—Walt Rand—and he called this again and again until a cautious answer came from close at his right hand. "Who is it? What do you want?"

Jim wheeled his bronc, saw dimly the shape of a man behind the shelter of a coral post. He cried: "Rand, you've got to stop this! You're being tricked!" He added, "I'm Douglas, the Association man."

He was already leaping down from saddle as Walt Rand's exclamation sounded

sharply: "What the hell did you say?"

"I'm the man Brooks says he saw murdered by the Tollivers. Brooks is a damn lying devil! He's got King Sewalt's crew up there behind the house, and he's using us to break the Tollivers."

A curse cut in on him, and the light from the flames above the doomed house suddenly showed him George Brooks' angry, twisted face next to Rand's. Other Basin men were crowding in as George Brooks cried, "Don't listen to him, Walt! This isn't Douglas! It's—it's somebody I've never laid eyes on before in my life!"

For a black moment then, Douglas was stopped—realizing that none of them knew him and that there was no way he could prove who he was. And, in that same instant, over at the doomed ranch house, the big door was flung open and a man came stumbling out, choking on heavy smoke that billowed through the opening. A bullet from the attackers met him dropping him lifeless on the veranda steps. One who tried to follow him was relentlessly driven back inside the burning building by a hail of gunfire.

Shortly, Douglas knew, those trapped people would have to take their choice between being burned alive or cut to pieces by lead. Even men like Lake and Rupe Tolliver did not deserve such a fate. The Basin ranchers were enraged beyond reason or mercy, and Jim Douglas' frantic effort to avert this tragedy had fallen flat.

Then a voice of one of the men at Douglas' elbow said tightly: "What do you mean, Brooks—you never laid eyes on this gent before? Why, I seen you and him together this morning, rowing with Lake and Orrin Tolliver in front of the newspaper office. And come to think of it, seems to me I *did* hear one of them call him an Association man—"

At that, the tense scene broke. Caught in his lie, face a twisted mask of hatred, George Brooks whipped up his revolver and fired twice. Douglas crumpled forward into the dust, and Brooks was already turning, plunging away. Someone shot but missed, and then Brooks was gone into the tangled shadows of the corral.

On his face in the dirt, Jim Douglas fought against the shocking pain of the bullet wound. Somehow he got his feet under him. His gun was still in his hand

and his one compelling urgency was to stop George Brooks.

Confusion split the night now, as some of the T Square men tried another sortie from the burning house and a sudden yell went along the line of attackers to hold fire. "Come out Tolliver!" Walt Rand's voice shouted. "We aren't shooting."

Meanwhile Douglas pegged forward, stumbling. Hot blood ran down his side. He rounded the corral, caught momentary sight of Brooks and fired a close miss. The renegade newspaperman's silhouette dropped quickly out of line, and at the same moment Brooks was squalling: "King! King Sewalt! *Here!*"

Next moment Douglas tripped and fell flat, with a force that almost knocked him unconscious. He lay there gathering his strength, hearing the mad noise break around him. There was something new, then—a drumming through the ground. He pushed up dazedly—and saw them coming down the slope of the hill behind the ranch.

Sewalt and his men, answering Brooks' frantic cry for help!

Crouched on his knees, Douglas loosed a bullet and saw a horse crash under its rider. It didn't look like Sewalt. Quickly though, it became apparent that this time the outlaw band had tangled with something too big for it; now, both Tollivers and Basin men were turning their guns on the mounted charge, their differences forgotten in a common hatred of Sewalt's rustlers. He saw one outlaw dragged from saddle as his horse lunged into the hands of three grounded men. He saw others of the gang fighting frantically to turn back, only to be swept from their broncs by well-placed lead.

Where was Brooks?

Douglas lurched to his feet, moved forward through firelit shadows, through the swirl of dust and burnt powder, searching. And then he saw his man. Brooks had

caught the flying reins of a riderless horse and was fighting to quiet it, to hold it down long enough to hunt stirrup. When Douglas shouted his name, running forward, the man turned his head quickly.

In that instant, a wild bullet struck the tossing head of the horse and it went crashing down, lifeless. Brooks was jerked off his feet and across its carcass. He came up immediately, twisting about, forced now to face Douglas.

The latter waited. His legs were spread apart and he swayed a little as he stood there, gun hanging at full arm's length toward the ground. They faced each other that way across the firelight—the Association agent, and the schemer. Then the weapon in Brooks' hand rocked up, flamed.

He fired too wildly and he missed. But the bullet from Douglas' gun went true to its mark, although pain and blackness were already washing over him as the bucking of the weapon in his hand revived the agony of a bullet-blasted body.

Leadily he saw Brooks hurled about, thrown forward across the body of the dead bronc—dead himself. And then it was as though the stiffness went out of Douglas's legs. He broke, slumped forward without the strength to hold himself up. The ground struck him with a blow.

A VOICE cried: "Here's one!"
"Hell! It's Douglas—get him into the bunkhouse, quick!"

He knew vaguely that they lifted him, carried him for some unknown length of time. Then the light of a burning lamp came to hurt his eyes and he was laid not ungently on the rough blanketing of a hard bunk.

"Gawd! He's bloody!" someone said.

"Looks like it might be only a shoulder wound. Hey, Miss Kathy! Take good care of this one—he's the gent that broke this thing up!"

BLOOD AND GUTS built the West, pushed those stubborn frontiers to the Pacific, and paved the way for a glorious new empire. . . . Blood and guts was the stock in trade of those colorful pioneers who smashed the gunbacked robber barons and gave that new country freedom from fear forever. . . . Blood and guts mark the tales of *Big-Book Western* as true-to-life sagas of the two-fisted, hell-roaring days of the building of that iron man's West. . . . Next month more will appear—by such top-hands as Harry F. Olmsted, Tom Roan, James Shaffer, and others. Don't miss the big treasure-load of adventure, gunsmoke and high drama—your March issue will be on your newsstand January 21!

Things swam into focus then, and the first clear sight he had was of the face of the girl—wan, but as beautiful as he remembered it. When he tried to sit up she placed a restraining hand against his chest. "Please!" she said, and he lay back on the blanket looking at her. Past her through a window he could see the dance of flames as the Tolliver house burned.

"You couldn't save it?" he asked heavily.

"No." But she smiled a little. "It can be built again—this time maybe with real windows instead of rifle slits! I've hated the place—it was like a jail!"

She had his shirt cut away, was washing blood from his shoulder when Walt Rand came up, tired and powderstained. "How is he?"

"I'm all right," Douglas answered. "It hurts like the dickens but it's not much of a hole. The fight's over?"

"We cleaned out that whole gang of owlhooters!" grunted Rand. "Lake Tolliver took a bullet, and one or two of our men were shot up. Still, it could have been a lot worse!"

"I got Brooks, didn't I?"

"Yes." Rand's face hardened. "We're just beginning to realize how he made monkeys out of all of us. If it hadn't been for you—"

Jim Douglas shrugged, but that hurt his shoulder. He winced and then grinned a little. "I'll have to remember not to do that again!"

There were others about him then and Kathy stood up to make room for them. Matt Tolliver, with Orrin pushing his wheel chair, looked across at the man on the bunk.

"Well, son," said Matt. "You're the man I want to see. How do I go about joining your Association?"

Douglas blinked in surprise. "You mean that?"

"Us Tollivers have learned our lesson, I reckon," said the patriarch of Holster Basin. "Tonight's showed us that no man is big enough he don't have to care what his neighbors think of him. Nor so strong that he can be safe if some varmint wants to turn their hatred and suspicion to evil. The country is filling up, I guess. If you got to have neighbors the only thing to do is behave neighborly toward them. Which

means signing on with the Association!" He held out a bony, clawlike hand. "Yes, young man, I want to join. I like the cut of you, Jim Douglas—and so I think I'd like the outfit you represent."

As Douglas shook hands with him, Walt Rand exclaimed, "By God, Matt! With the Tollivers in, the whole Basin will jump to sign! And no owlhoot crew like Sewalt's will dare to buck us again, or try to use those south rim passes."

"By the way, Rand," old Matt said drily, cocking an eye at the Basin rancher. "Before you boys leave here tonight we'd better get together and make some plans for an election. We'll need a new sheriff now. Lake was my own son," he added, in a heavy tone, "but I got to admit he didn't do a hell of a lot of good. None of those boys of his would fit the bill, either—and anyway, they're gonna find themselves too busy with hammer and saw helpin' rebuild our house, to have time for any sheriffin'. A little honest work won't hurt 'em none!"

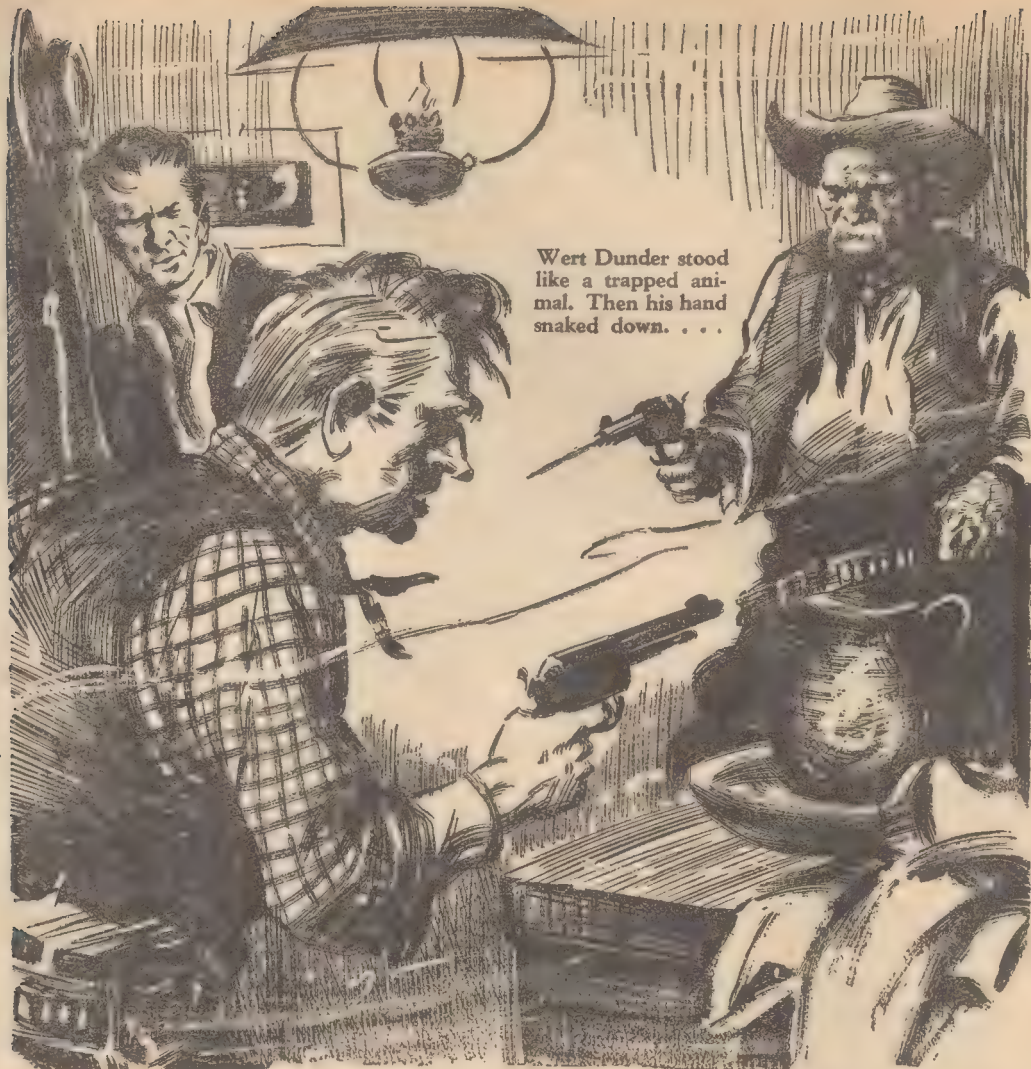
"While we're about it," he went on, "we may as well get a new judge—Simon's been no use to anybody! Maybe it's high time the Tollivers stopped trying to run everybody else's lives for them and took on T Square as a full time job!"

Orrin Tolliver, looking down past his father's silvered head, studied Jim Douglas. He said suddenly: "What about you, Douglas? I imagine there isn't a man in the Basin wouldn't vote for you if you'd let us put you in the sheriff's office."

Jim looked his astonishment. "That's mighty flattering!" he managed, finally. "But as a matter of fact, I've already got a job I like. You see, I believe in the Association—I'd like to stick with it and help put it across. But just the same," he added, "you may be seeing quite a lot of me here in the Basin!"

His eyes sought the girl's face as he said that. She blushed, and dropped her glance. Old Matt saw the exchange of looks, and a warped grin touched his lips.

"Look alive, Orrin!" he grunted. "Give this rockin' horse chair a shove, will you? We got to see about that election. Besides," he added, "can't you see your daughter's got to be left alone so she can do a decent job of nursin' this sick man?"



Wert Dunder stood like a trapped animal. Then his hand snaked down. . . .

WORD OF THE DAMNED

THE FEEBLE light of Sailor Digging's scattered structures had been barely visible in the slanting rain. A shoving wind from the Siskiyou had helped guide the man who knocked vigorously on Doc Ashrow's door. He rounded thin shoulders against it. He shifted weight and his eyes made uneasy inquiries along the churned camp street.

Within the warm cabin three people heard. Neil Ashrow moved a checker and

Doc Ashrow fought desperately to save a broken man who'd been condemned to speak the truth by a strange and fatal head wound. . . . And waited for the words which would force a killer to send Doc down the last lone trail, hot on the heels of his dying patient! . . .

By **GIFF CHESHIRE**

looked up from the board. Tom Wyler, camp alcalde, grunted and kept his eyes on the game. Ashrow rose from the table. As his gaze moved by the fireplace his eyes noted that Cecily had quit her knitting, worry in the glance she flung at the door.

Ashrow crossed the room and opened the door, cutting off a renewed rap. He looked at the figure that emerged in the spill of light, the man returning the study in unyielding stoniness.

"Doc, you're coming with me," the man said.

Ashrow's tilting head motioned him in. The newcomer thrust back his hat but kept it on, drawing a broken line of dripping water across the clean puncheon floor. A gun bulged under his wet slicker.

"What do you want with me, Dunder?" Ashrow asked, as he closed the door.

Wert Dunder examined the room, sliding a brief glance past Ashrow's young wife to settle it on the alcalde's tensing shape. He gave Wyler a warning stare. The alcalde kept seat, both arms on the table, but he had bristled. "My partner got shot," Dunder said, "in the head. So I couldn't fetch him in."

The man's gaunt face was expressionless under a wet, straggling beard. A drop of rain hung on the tip of his hooked nose. His darting eyes were cold and dead as basalt.

"Where is he?" Ashrow asked.

"Up at the Moccasin Creek claim."

"Who shot him?"

"Some dry-gulching son!" Dunder exploded, unworded profanity heating his voice. "You coming with me?"

Annoyance broke the set of Ashrow's face as he nodded and turned toward an inside door.

Cecily's voice rose insistently. "It's a trick!"

Ashrow swung the door behind him. Cecily had only put his own feeling into words. It could be a trick, and one he couldn't sidestep. Some weeks before Dunder's partner, Rake Cribs, had sworn to kill Ashrow. The satchel was kept packed against any demand that could be made on a frontier doctor. Ashrow closed and lifted it onto the desk. Turning, he reached his wraps from a wall peg, settling his cloth coat across wide shoulders before pulling on the slicker.

His wide-brimmed hat shadowed the tight lines of his heavy face, replacing its youth with tired age. A sound reputation, he thought, could bring a man to trouble as easily as a bad one. He had lost no face in the community, he knew, by refusing to take up Rake Cribs' challenge. From the upper Illinois to the Applegate, they cited instances of Doc Ashrow's stubborn, impersonal courage in the practice of his profession. This could not come from a cowardly man.

Ashrow, though privately disturbed, had treated Cribs' challenge with quiet contempt. He realized he could do no stronger thing to level his enemy. He knew also that his reputation could be used against him. Doc Ashrow had never refused a call, day or night, baking summer or hellish winter. It was a thing that had lent comfort to the gold camps and to the ranching settlements.

Catching up his satchel settled the fear rising in Ashrow, turning him again into the doctor. He returned to the other room to find Dunder still standing suspiciously by the door.

The alcalde shoved the checker board across the table and got up, a scowl creasing his snowy features. "I'll ride along, Doc," he said.

"So will I." Cecily came to her feet.

Ashrow waited for this to react on Dunder. Veto lifted on the man's face and fell away. He shrugged stooped shoulders. "I don't care who comes, only I wish you'd get a wiggle on." That note of urgency—Ashrow couldn't decide if it was real or feigned.

Ashrow turned to catch his wife's reaction and bit his lip. The fear on her face had broken to reveal her stubborn anger. The temper that was nature's weapon against crippling anxiety. He smiled a small amusement at her rising fight. He wished that she could put it where it counted most, against the things her husband fought, against her older fears that haunted her each time she waited out a night alone. He felt a sudden hunger for her unqualified backing.

Tom Wyler was shrugging into his raincoat. Seeming to sense a delicacy between Ashrow and his wife, he nodded to Dunder. "Come over to the barn while I get horses." Dunder followed the alcalde outside.

"I won't forbid you to come, Cecily," Ashrow said, knowing he could voice no fears she couldn't turn against him. "But I wish you wouldn't."

Cecily's small shoulders were pulled back. "If Rake Cribs is scheming to push his fight with you, I'd rather be along to see it happen than wait here imagining it. If he's hurt, I just hope it's bad enough to finish him."

"If he's hurt," Ashrow said, "I have no choice. Don't you see, Cecily? If it's a trick, and I refuse the call, Rake Cribs has something to make his coward's brand stick. He'll have a laughing point. I couldn't stand that."

The taut shoulders fell slowly. "Right or wrong, I guess there's no changing your mind. But if Cribs is only waiting some place to kill you, then what would you do?"

"Then I'll try my best to kill him. But if that's it, Wyler's being with me would upset it. So won't you stay home?"

"I'm going, Neil. Make me stay behind and I'll only follow you."

Ashrow sighed and watched her move into the bedroom to change to rough-weather riding clothes. He was at once proud and resentful of her, for she had a hard, defensive realism she could not escape. Sound told him that Wyler had moved up to the door with horses. Then Cecily, ready, was coming out of the bedroom.

She had managed to pull a small smile onto her face, and her eyes wanted his forgiveness. "I wish I had your strength, Neil. In my heart I know you are right, but I can't help being afraid. I can't be as certain as you that your sense of duty is worth what it costs." Standing before him she rose quickly on her toes, asking his kiss. He gave it, knowing it did nothing to bridge the gulf widening between them.

THEY RODE rapidly into the enfolding hills, coming to where a valley broadened along the east fork of the Illinois. Dunder, suspicious, and crowding them, kept behind. Wyler rode ahead, and Ashrow was beside the dim figure of his wife. Her words still rang in his ears, and he weighed them with care. Did he get a just return on the driving urges that circumstances were forever engendering in him? Did it exact too much from him and Cecily

when he rode his countless miles through storm-swept, hostile Indian country to find death ahead of him in some outland cabin? Was anybody repaid when he fought for the life of some drunken, dissolute miner sucked from the slums of San Francisco by Southern Oregon's gold boom?

Least of all, had there been merit in his taking the part he had in regard to a recent death on Moccasin Creek? His compulsion there seemed oddly unbalanced by what it had brought him.

Jingo Quail, a partner of Cribs and Dunder, had disappeared. It had been Cribs who reported it to the camp, voicing fear that the waspish Rogue Indians had got him. His story had been accepted. Then Quail's body had washed up in high water on Moccasin Creek. It had been decided that Quail, as unsavory as his partners, had somehow managed to get himself drowned.

Only Doc Ashrow, who examined the body, had unsettled questions in his mind. The lack of water in Quail's lungs proved he had not drowned. The absence of wounds eliminated the Rogues. There were signs suggesting that Quail had been poisoned. A twist of pain was permanently set in the stiffened face, and there was an odd, backward bow in the spine.

Neil Ashrow had made his reconstruction. He gleaned evidence that the two remaining partners, Cribs and Dunder, were finding real pay dirt in their Long Toms on the Moccasin Creek claim after a long period of poverty. Both wore a look of guarded but intense excitement, detectable even in the dead-faced Dunder.

Neil Ashrow weighed his facts. The case was closed, officially. Jurisprudence in the territory lay in the mining districts under the direction of an elected alcalde. Tom Wyler, serving in that office locally, had no further interest in Jingo Quail's death beyond a certain satisfaction in its finality. The fast piling of events would soon bury it. The victim had been worth no sober man's consideration.

So where lay the interests of truth? Ashrow pondered it and made his hard decision. He had only a few facts and a feeling. He presented these to Tom Wyler, who was his personal friend. Attracted by the chance to hang Quail's two partners to the further good of his district, Wyler had taken it up with enthusiasm.

The miner's court had tried Rake Cribs and Wert Dunder, only to acquit them. the prosecutor made Ashrow his principal witness, and had been able to furnish little other incriminating evidences beyond demonstrating a theory that after his death Jingo Quail had been buried under a cut bank on the creek only to be washed out in the unprecedented flood. Effort after effort to tie Cribs and Dunder to the crime ended in failure. The court, fairer minded than such crude tribunals were reputed to be, had finally turned the pair loose in despair.

Rake Cribs' first move thereafter was to threaten the life of Neil Ashrow, making his challenge where he knew it would be carried inevitably to Ashrow's ears. It was a pressing demand in the man. In the trial he had branded Ashrow a malicious liar. It was the code of his kind to wipe out such debts with gunplay. Ashrow, reviewing this, recalled that Cecily's terror had been nearly matched by her exasperation.

"It was all so senseless, Neil," she had stormed at him. "What difference would it ever have made if you had kept still?"

"When you have killed," Ashrow answered patiently, "you are easily tempted to kill again. Somewhere there may be a man, or several, grateful that I tried to expose them."

"I have no doubt they are killers, and now it will be you." And the argument had ended with Cecily giving way to hysterical crying.

Heading now toward Moccasin Creek, Ashrow was having his own private doubts. Until Cribs' threat had come, he had been oblivious to the fact that there was much he owed Cecily as well, even though she had accepted her lot voluntarily in marrying him.

Ashrow found that Wyler had fallen back. "I like a man who puts his guts behind his principles," the alcalde said grudgingly, "but I hate a fool."

"They won't make trouble with you along, Tom," Ashrow said.

Wyler made an impatient motion with his hand. "I ain't thinking of that. I expect Rake Cribs has probably got his comings. And no wonder. A dozen men in this district would like to put a slug in him, including me. You tried to get him hung once, and now probably you're going to

try to save his life. There's where you're playing the fool, Neil. Let the sidewinder die."

Ashrow's tired smile was lost in the night. "But I didn't do the trying, Tom. I only presented what I thought to be truths. The court acquitted him and justice has apparently been served. This is a new case."

There was a snort. "All right. If Cribs is hurt bad enough he'll die without your help. Suppose you pull him through. Are you so knot-headed you think he'll drop his fight talk?"

"You ought to know me better than that, Tom," Ashrow said sharply. "His kind has no gratitude. He has made his talk that the district isn't big enough for the pair of us. He isn't the type to duck out a loop-hole like that."

There was a silence, then Wyler said, "I don't get it," and rode ahead.

Four stumbling miles above Sailor Diggings they came to the gulch of Moccasin Creek. A quarter mile along its length they raised the greasy lamplight of a cabin. There was a sudden dryness in Ashrow's throat. He said, "Wait here with Cecily, Tom, I'll ride in behind Dunder." Wyler made an objecting grunt, then yielded.

Dunder, hearing, pulled his horse ahead. Beyond talk, Cecily obeyed. There was nothing to disturb the monotonous drone of the whipping storm. Dunder rode in the advance position without apparent worry, allaying Ashrow's fears that fire might come from the cabin. Nor would he be apt to let trouble erupt indoors while the camp alcalde was outside.

They reached the door and swung down. Leaving his mount neck-reined, Dunder strode to the door and shoved it open, giving no announcement of his presence. Still more relieved, Ashrow swung down with his bag and followed. Littered and overhot, the interior at first seemed empty. Ashrow came into the room behind Dunder, carefully leaving the door ajar. His prospecting gaze showed him a man lying inertly in a wall bunk. A man hurt beyond doubt, and Rake Cribs.

"Tell him to come in," Ashrow said to Dunder. For a moment while he stared at his enemy, Ashrow felt only bitter resentment. The giant bulk of the man was evident under the filthy blankets. His shaggy

yellow head was bandaged. His mouth was open with the faintest tremor of motion forming and reforming on his lips. A soundless conversation seemed to flow there. The last personal concerns of Neil Ashrow fell away before the rising drives of the doctor.

He had pulled off his slicker and was warming his hands at the fire when Dunder returned with Cecily and Wyler. No one spoke but Ashrow noted the tremendous relief that surged in Cecily's eyes. Wyler took his look at Cribs, then heeled around in contempt. Ashrow looked at Dunder and nodded toward the kettle on the fireplace chain.

"If you've got a wash basin, fill it with hot water." He worked his long fingers, limbering and drying them in the heat. He ran a hand over his thick hair, then turned back to the patient. Unwinding the dirty, bloody bandage, he narrowed his eyes. Dunder had not exaggerated. Cribs had been shot in the head, at a gruesome angle above his eyes. The attacker, Ashrow noted briefly, must have fired from a high point, to the right and slightly ahead.

Now the meaning of Cribs' soundless conversation was clear. The brain convolution directly behind the eye was the center of speech. It was either depressed or pierced by the bone splinter, resulting in uniformed talk on the man's lips. His breath, Ashrow noted, was too shallow to make sound.

It was a rare and interesting thing he had heard about, but never encountered. He would have to trepan and correct the skull fracture, possibly having to dig for splinters. It would be a delicate and dangerous undertaking. The challenge stirred him.

HE TURNED and opened his bag. He dragged the room's one crude table to the side of the bunk, and spread out his sparse surgical instruments. Cecily made no move to give him the assistance he had trained her to, standing quiet and stony by the fireplace.

Tom Wyler turned up the palms of his hands in a gesture of defeat. Ashrow removed his coat and turned up his sleeves. He took a rubber apron from the bag and tied it on. He soaped and washed his hands carefully and patiently in the hot water Dunder brought to the table.

The man hovered a moment. "Think you can save him, Doc?"

Ashrow shrugged.

"He's pretty bad, ain't he, Doc?" Dunder asked insistently.

The doctor gave him a long cold glance. "Damn bad, and I doubt if I can do much."

The shock of reaction ran through the room. Dunder heeled quickly, but not before the woodenness of his face broke in faint relief.

Ashrow thought wonderingly, "He wants the man to die!"

Cecily sent a sharp, startled look to Dunder. Wyler lifted a hand and unbuttoned his coat. He pushed back the tail to reveal the grips of his holstered gun, but he slid the hand on past. Dunder, kicking a log on the fire, had not noticed. Wyler brought out his tobacco plug and lifted it to his lips, his eyes vacant with inner probing.

Ashrow worked the chill from his nerves and resumed his chore in a concentration so sharp it clouded everything beyond the movement of his skilled fingers. Trepanning beside the fracture enabled him to lift the smashed bone into place. The lightening of shock brought a quick return of color to Cribs' skin and his breath grew deeper and stronger. This was hope and Ashrow smiled grimly. If the brain was not damaged he had a chance, and Neil Ashrow knew now he was working against Wert Dunder's will.

Ashrow straightened his back and rolled his shoulders to loosen them. Dunder had dropped onto a nail keg that served as a chair and was watching the operation intently.

To his wife, Ashrow said, "See if you can fix a cone on the lamp chimney to give me better light."

Without words she looked about and Dunder rose to find her an old newspaper in a littered corner.

Tom Wyler, at the end of his long rumination, spoke suddenly. "Dunder, suppose you tell me how it happened."

Dunder kept his eyes on Cecily's hands, which were shaping a paper shade for the lamp. The mask of the basalt was on his face again. Then the gaze he directed to the alcalde was unflinching.

"Rake came in ahead of me this evening. I heard a shot but figured it was him trying to pot a thieving coon. When I got in

I found him laying out in the yard. From his head I figured somebody plugged him from the side of the hill. It ain't no wonder. Rake's always picking trouble."

"Then what?" Wyler asked.

"Well, I brung him in and stripped the wet duds off of him and got him into his bunk. I put the best bandage I could on his head and went after Doc. You know the rest."

Wyler turned to Ashrow. "That sound all right to you, Doc?"

Ashrow, waiting for a better light, shrugged lightly. "It sounds all right. Cribs was shot from above and a little ahead." He paused a short moment and when he resumed, his voice was tired. There was that odd urgency in Dunder that contradicted everything the man did and said. "If I can pull him through, maybe he can tell us."

"Yeah," Dunder said. "I reckon it's up to you, Doc." His gaze was cool and unrevealing.

When Cecily had fixed the lamp, Ashrow went back to his task. Cribs' color kept improving, his breath growing deeper and steadier. Ashrow knew that vital information was locked in that damaged brain or Dunder would not fear the man's recovery. Ashrow's skill now became a weapon of justice that he wielded, fighting only to keep that stored knowledge from being lost. He carefully picked the bone fragments from the perimeter of the brain. Then he discovered the thing he had feared when his probe contacted the blunt end of a bone splinter driven straight into the brain. When he pressed it, Cribs' lips twisted, trying again to frame speech.

It was a moment of awful decision for Ashrow. He recalled the words he had once uttered to Cecily: "When a man has killed; he is easily tempted to kill again." He had only the dimmest hope of saving Cribs' life, and, if he died, valuable information would be lost. If that splinter were driven deeper, there was an even chance it would finish the man. But there was also a chance that it would stimulate the already irritated speech center to bring out unguarded and involuntary talk. Just possibly he had the means of lifting a vital secret from a brain destined to soon grow cold in death.

There was a moment of terrible temp-

tation, then the ethics of the surgeon prevailed. It was swift and simple, after that. He removed the splinter carefully from its seat and knew he had done all he could unless fate permitted him eventually to move the patient to his surgery for more thorough and expert repair. He applied a dressing and bound the head.

It was not until he had straightened that he realized the tension in his back and neck. He said, "That's all I can do. Tom, you'd better take Cecily home. I'll stay."

He saw the protest in Cecily's eyes, but it left under his frown. Wyler, reflecting, said, "She looks tired enough to spill. I guess I'd better. But I'll be back."

"Maybe you don't need to stay, Doc," Dunder cut in. "I can set with Rake. I'll come and get you again if he turns worse."

Ashrow met his gaze calmly. "I'll stay."

A deep weariness hit him after the alcalde left with Cecily. He took seat by the fireplace, puffing his pipe, waiting for the cards to fall. A restlessness was in Dunder now, a repressed urge to action. He traced his uneasiness on the puncheon floor with his continual pacing. Ashrow, watching guardedly, knew he was alone with a killer.

THE PATTERN grew clearer to him now that he had time to think about it. The pair probably had killed Jingo Quail together to eliminate one share in the claim. The process must have appealed to Dunder, and he had shot his partner. Cribs must have realized the treachery, or Dunder would not be so eager for him to die. And the final touch in callous cunning had come when Dunder himself had ridden for the doctor, having bungled his shot but certain Cribs would never talk again. The seeming act of concern must have appealed to him as a means of lending credence to the story he was prepared to tell.

And now, Ashrow knew, Dunder would make good his work if given the slightest chance. Ashrow gave him no such opportunity, though now he was fighting back a drugging fatigue. An hour passed and another, and his wait for Wyler's return became a wearing concentration. It became the same tearing urgency in Dunder. If he was to have his chance, it had to be before the alcalde returned.

Then hoofbeats sounded faintly through the storm racket, down the canyon. Dun-

der, his walk, taking him always by Cribs' bunk, halted suddenly.

"Ain't that a funny color Rake's got, Doc?"

Ashrow shoved to his feet, moving to the bunk. The first brush of his gaze told him the complication he had anticipated had come. Cerebral hemorrhage. He noted the cynotic tinge to Cribs' lips and cheeks, the irregular tremors of the great chest. Those taunting lips worked and reworked, framing inaudible intelligence.

At the head of the bunk, Wert Dunder stared down at his partner, oblivious of Ashrow. Expectancy put the merest glitter in his eyes. Ashrow knew there was nothing to alarm the man now. Death was here. Dunder sensed and awaited it.

A swift ridden horse, coming through the storm, pulled up outside. Ashrow noted this, and in the same moment was tensing.

Rake Cribs' elbows tried to lift his weight. He fell back. Expression ran across the gray cheeks, and he spoke:

"We ain't got no argument, Wert—hell, we're panning five hundred a day and it'll last forever—coming a heller of a storm, Wert, we better cut in—if we go into camp tonight, we better fetch out!"

They were words in no connected pattern of sense, but Wert Dunder straightened, slack cheeks pale. He gave Ashrow a look of intense study.

"He's coming to, ain't he? He's going to talk, ain't he?"

"It sounds like it, doesn't it?" Ashrow caught sound that told him Tom Wyler was putting his saddle into the leanto shed.

Cribs' voice grew stronger, urgency creeping into it: "Damn you, Wert, don't look at me like that!" Dunder moved then, a cuffing hand slapping Cribs hard on the side of the head. Ashrow, caught off guard, couldn't move to stop it.

Words gushed out of Cribs then: "Wert, put down that gun!"

"So you were at the top of the bank, with him at the bottom!" Ashrow breathed. "That was the part I didn't understand."

Cribs, straining, went slack suddenly. The talk ceased. Ashrow laid a hand on his chest, then looked grimly at Dunder. "You finished him."

"He was lying, Doc. I had to stop his dirty lies. We had a quarrel today, but I ain't the one who plugged him. Maybe he thinks so, or maybe it was just his cussed meanness. The last thing he said to me today was that he was going to fix me."

Ashrow's smile was cold. "You shot him, but that doesn't have to be proved now. You killed him with that slap. And that's murder."

"You're the only one who seen it, Doc. Rake never forgot a grudge. He'd of got you, if he'd lived. Keep your mouth shut."

(Continued on page 130)



BURCHARD'S NAME LED THE DEVIL'S LIST

Burchard treated the world as it treated him—rough. He had no ties to bind him—and wanted none. He knew no law—and thought no law could reach him. Yet when Will Burchard saw cold-blooded murder done that hardy pioneer and his woman, white-hot fury whipped him on to lead a rag-tag, gun-shy rancher's army against the range's deadly gunmaster—and smash the very cow kingdom Burchard one day planned to steal!

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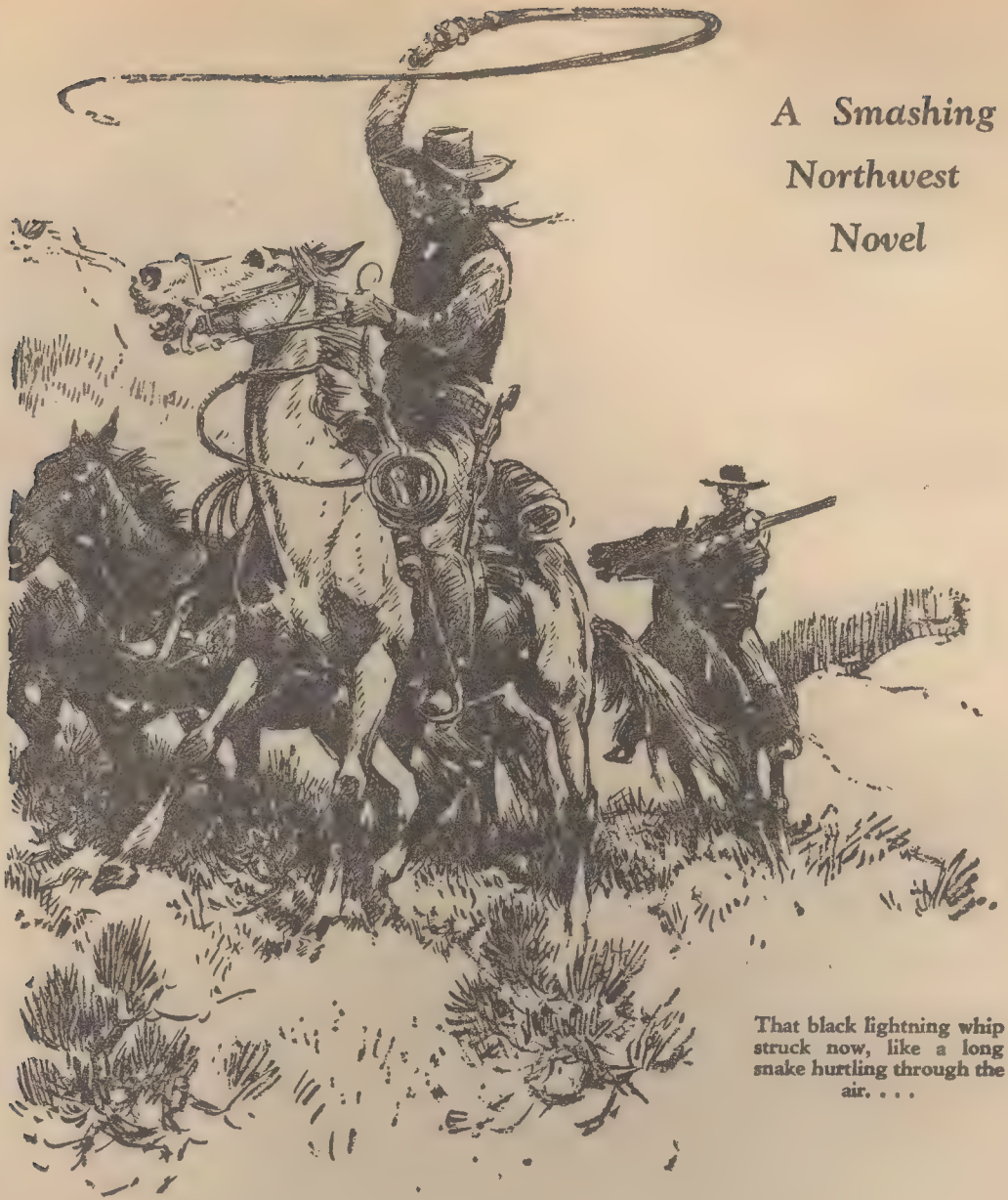


The wetbacks slid smoothly by, and the rider barely glanced around.

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BULLWHIP BILL'S BLACKSNAKE SAUCE

A Smashing
Northwest
Novel



That black lightning whip
struck now, like a long
snake hurtling through the
air. . . .

Chapter I

BLOOD AND BLACK LIGHTNING!

THE NOISE came from eastward in the first hazy streak of dawnlight cracking along the rim of the jagged horizon. It came in spurts, sometimes dying completely away, then returning as a faint, far pounding of drums. The wind brought it up the canyon and lifted it to the

north rim in uncertain little rumbles. As it drew closer, a whispery rattle and a bell-like ringing mixed with the rumble, a rattle and tapping that meant hoofs—many hoofs beating westward along the canyon floor and heading toward a narrow, mile-deep break in the mountain wall above the

Montana-Idaho line. One thing it was.

Horsethieves! It was the first thought that shot through the gray-haired head of big and bulky Bullwhip Bill McCrackin. He sat jerked erect in his blankets there on the rim, the ashes of a dead little campfire to his left, his tall old Gabriel's Trumpet standing as still as a white marble tombstone where he had been grazing in the deep grass beyond an icy little spring of water in a bowl of rocks.

No one but rustlers would be running horses at such a pace this early in the morning. Horses were driven slowly when honest men had to drive them. Gunfire never entered a drive unless it was to scare the leaders and turn a stampede to keep the brutes from racing head-long over a cliff.

No man liked to be seen close to one of those dangerous runs, even if he was high on a rim above it. Men trailing such a drive were often known to pounce down on any man they came upon, and try their best to shoulder some blame on him.

Ears cocked, one eye watching the canyon, he swept the blankets aside and dressed hurriedly, buckling on his old ivory-butted .45's. This was no time to think of starting a fire and getting himself a can of strong coffee. Rolling up his belongings, he caught old Gabriel's Trumpet and saddled him, leaving him out of sight there in the low trees beyond the water. He returned to the rim and stood behind a tall rock, looking down the canyon.

He saw horses breaking the cover of a pine thicket beyond the narrow gash. A quick guess told him that there were between fifty and sixty horses in the herd.

"Steel dust stuff!" He nodded soberly, then glanced at the low trees hiding Gabriel's Trumpet. "Wouldn't be scrubs, not a-comin' an' a-fightin' an' a-runnin' like that."

He was beginning to see the riders now, his eyes slowly widening as the first one pitched from the edge of the pines on a tall, steel-colored gelding. To that rider's left popped another, then a third, and finally a fourth.

"Hell, *wimmin*!" He rubbed his eyes just to make sure. "A bright-haired gal first, older woman right behind her, an' them other two! One's a gal, an' I'm damned if the other'n don't look like a boy.

Nary one of them last two past sixteen!"

The fifth and sixth appeared twenty or thirty seconds later, but one was already out of the fighting, a long, lean figure roped belly-first across a tall roan's saddle. He was an old man with silver-white hair shining in the light from the sky.

Just ahead of the old man, leading the roan from the saddle of a big, wiry black, rode a far younger man, all in black himself except for a wide-brimmed white hat.

There was the fighter, that young duck trying to cover the rear with a Winchester. A young fellow with plenty of guts.

Other men were pouring from the trees behind the young fellow now, coming as a cloud mushrooming outward. Sudden gunfire raged. One bullet struck the roan, making him lunge wildly, break loose and come dashing on ahead to hug closer to the other horses. Now, the young fellow had a better chance, swinging right and left, Winchester crashing and echoing steadily, every shot sending a bullet tearing into the trees.

"Must have more lives than a tom-cat," speculated McCrackin, calmly reaching into a pocket for a chew of Brown Mule. "May make the break, but they still ain't got a chance." He looked down into the canyon just below him. "When the others pour through the break they can fan out, an' then there'll be some real hell to pay."

He had no thought yet of poking his nose into it. There was enough trouble in the beat-down world without a man looking for it. But he made the mistake of looking back at the girl, the woman and the boy and girl down there. Hell! They were just plain damn' kids! And behind them stormed a mob of thirty men, pouring from the trees.

Bullwhip Bill McCrackin never needed much encouragement to plow into a fight, especially one where men were doing their best to kill women and children. Now he looked back at the young fellow, stopping as he reached Gabriel's Trumpet, one hand on the saddle horn.

The young fellow had hit the narrow gash, and it was as though he knew that it was all up for him. McCrackin's eyes widened as he saw what he was going to do. He left the saddle of his wiry black, the horse still at a run. In a stumbling fall he went down, letting the tall horse go on.

In a moment he was up, limping. McCrackin saw him wheel and lift his rifle for one last shot. Then he was throwing the rifle aside, empty.

It looked like plain suicide now. The young fellow scrambled up the south side of the gash. Above him loomed tons and tons of loose shale. He was heading right into it, now down to hands and knees, now up and running in a crouch, the bullets cutting everything to slivers around him. Even the men who had been chasing him were yelling in a moment, some of them realizing what was about to take place and terror shining in their popping eyes as they yelled.

It was no use. The young fellow had made up his mind. He was going to use himself to start a rock slide to choke the gash and give the woman, the girl and the two kids ahead a chance to make their getaway.

Bullwhip Bill McCrackin never exactly knew how he started down the rim, pressing hard on his rusty rowels, old Gabriel's Trumpet taking him through the rocks and brush. His rifle swung up from a strap on the left side of his saddle, coming into his hands automatically.

But there was no way of stopping the young fellow. That joker had made up his mind. He was high on the steep rocks now, kicking and climbing, doing everything he could to start the shale to sliding. Suddenly he slipped, fell and slid back a few yards, a puff of dust blotting him out, a relieved yell coming from one of the men below.

"Only there he goes agin!" half-gasped McCrackin as he sped on down the rim, rifle ready, the ever-shining old blacksnake whip on his shoulder—twenty feet of leather that could do about everything but talk in his hands. "He ain't no damn quitter, the boy ain't. *Gosh!*"

THE YOUNG fellow was starting it. Up and climbing again, he was likē a scotting lizard, feet kicking wildly to the right and left. Rocks were beginning to slip, slide and bounce. A growing wave of red dust started ruffling up the slope, growing higher and higher. Men on the other side of the gash suddenly wheeled back to get away from the trap.

Dust rising in larger clouds—looking like red ocean waves running up the slope of a

tall, steep hill—hid the rest of it. There was a grinding and crunching, a mountain-side beginning to move, the thunder growing and growing. McCrackin heard the girl screaming below as she wheeled her horse and sat staring, horror in her eyes:

"Johnny! Johnny! Johnny!"

"Too late, kid!" McCrackin was suddenly pulling up and swinging in behind a clump of tall rocks right on the rim. "He's done done it!"

A wail answered him, slapping a rock to his left, now a yard away, a bullet smashing into splinters. His eyes popped as if he had never heard a thing like that before. Then he was swearing as another bullet smashed just to his right.

"So yuh can't have him, an' now yo'll take me, huh?" He swung his horse to the left, hunting better shelter. The great red cloud of dust still hung over the gash and filled it from top to bottom. "Yo're gonna start somethin' fore yuh know it!"

But even now, realizing what he was about to run himself into, he might have stayed out of it. With Gabriel's Trumpet in the clear, he hit the ground just as another bullet splattered itself to bits against the rocks, showing that the gang down the canyon was crazy enough to shoot at anybody or anything.

He moved back to the rim. Ignoring another hot slug he looked at the gash where the dust was gradually lifting, and saw an unbelievable thing. It was the young fellow—or his body. For a few moments he could not tell whether he was dead or alive. Somehow he had managed to keep on top of the slide; there he was, lying on the still rock.

Men on the other side of the gash had spotted him. McCrackin saw six of them hurrying forward, coming afoot, the rocks too rough for horses. The woman, the girl and the kids ahead could not be followed on horseback unless the gang below took another route.

As the hurrying men came within a few rods of him the young fellow stirred, sat up drunkenly, then fell back. Before he could move again the men were on him, one of them striking him across the head with the long barrel of a six-shooter.

This was murder or as close to it as one could come without actually killing! The six-shooter was lifting for another stroke

when McCrackin's long old rifle ripped its ribbon of fire from the rim. The crash was like the harsh ring of a gong spreading up and down the canyon; the bullet smacked into the rocks a couple of yards above the man with the lifted six-shooter, and a shower of chipped rock spewed down.

Two men grabbed up the young fellow, stumbling and falling away with him. McCrackin was about to try to make them drop him with another shot, but a thought held him. One of the fools down there might turn and pour a shot into the young fellow as they left him.

The woman and the girl were going on with the horses. The boy down there was leading the roan with the old man across the saddle. The little girl was whipping up the rear. None of them were yet far enough away to escape a well-placed bullet. McCrackin lay sprawled there on the rim—as much a party in the eyes of the law to the stealing as anyone else.

"An' when I put my foot in a thing," he told himself, grimly, "I mostwise generally kinda hang 'round to see the rest of the wadin' done. Guess I'll kinda fall back with them broncs." He glanced at them again, the dust lifting behind them. "If they let me get close enough maybe I can find out how big a fool I am this time, pokin' my nose into somethin' I maybe ain't got no business."

But merely turning and slipping away was not as easy as it looked. He had been seen by any number of the riders down the canyon. About a dozen of them were already racing toward the north wall, intending to come up a narrow break to the rim. That meant if a dozen could come the rest would soon follow. Once he was brushed out of the way they could swing on, shoot the woman, the girl and the kids from the rim.

There was only one thing to do. He rode swiftly on down the rim, keeping himself hidden in the rocks and trees. He came within a few rods of the place where the riders would come up, left his horse again, and hustled forward, trying desperately to keep himself down.

This was work for that blacksnake whip now. A glance along the rim had told him that this was probably the only place the men below could reach the top.

Waiting here, he saw the young fellow

again. He had been forked across the saddle of a big bay, and seemed to be fully back to his senses. Men surrounded him as if they had a tiger between them—cowards with six-shooters. A fool would know that his hands were tied to the saddle horn or handcuffed there. Another length of rope probably tied his feet in the stirrups. Two other ropes ran from the horse's head to saddle horns, a positive sign that he was a prisoner who could not bolt.

A noise of hoofs climbing upward sounded just below now. McCrackin gave a few more seconds' attention to his whip. From his pocket he took out a big old Spanish *peso* with a slot cut in the middle of it. Running the wire-hard rawhide lash through the slot, he looped it back, fastening the *peso* solidly. Ready now, he grinned his tobacco stained grin—half-brother to the Devil, and Old Billy Hell to boot, about to let his black lightning Satan's sidewinder whip get to work.

The place where the riders would have to hit the rim was ideal—just about sixteen feet away, a narrow, V-shaped break that would let one man appear at a time. He heard the horse snort, heard the rocks roll and slip, then saw the head of the man appear, the top of a big black hat, then the wide brim. Flat on his belly, McCrackin grinned again, hidden behind a little pile of rocks. This was it—and would they be surprised to hell!

Now he could see the man's face covered with a week's growth of ugly red beard, the nose bulbous, split just below it by a wide-flaring hare lip—an ugly customer in any way a man looked at him, his dark-clad shoulders rising, now his big bay horse beginning to show. And then it was the proper moment, the right instant.

The whip sped forward at the proper instant. Many men had called it black lightning in the past. It was like lightning now, a long snake striking with only couple of feet of fast movement in the strong arm behind it. The *peso* struck, a sickening *plop!* sounded, and the man on the horse rocked backward, only a grunt coming from him. As if he had been shot squarely in the center of the forehead, he rolled drunkenly back over his horse's rump. The horse snorted and came on, amid wild yells behind, the sounds of riders trying to turn and flee . . .

Chapter II

TOMBSTONE FROM THE SKY

STOPPING that first man had been duck soup. The others, unable to make a rush, would be easily held back. Men down the dangerous, trough-like break in the rocks—no better than a wild-goat trail at the most—had been expecting the worst. More of them were turning back, believing he had been shot from his saddle. As he passed, McCrackin read the "big" brand on his right hip and saw that it was a coiled rattler.

"A Snake River brand," he grunted. "Idaho stuff."

He was still waiting for someone else to come up. By shifting a couple of yards to his left, he was able to take a look downward through a thick fringe of weeds.

The man he had spilled off the bay was still there, looking back down the slope, not yet knowing what had happened to him. The long old whip had been quicker than the eye.

Below the man the trough-like trail had almost cleared. Only four men were still on it, making their way down a steeper slope. Each was turned in his saddle, looking at the red-head behind. When the last of the four was down, a big, square-shouldered, dark man of forty with a star on his vest cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled up the slope.

"Lip! *Big Lip*, up there! Are you shot!"

"Damnfino." The hare-lip pawed an uncertain red hand across his face, his thick voice loud enough to be heard only fifty or sixty feet away. "I—I must be sick—or somethin'. Damnfino. Queer. Plum queer, I swear." He stumbled to his feet, standing there rocking like a man in the last stages of intoxication. "Wonder—wot'nhell happened to my—my hoss?"

"Hey, Big Lip Brown, up there!" The man with the star was yelling up the slope again. "What's the matter with you?"

"Damnfino." Again the red-head pawed that half-limp hand at his face. "Gotta—gotta find my hoss."

McCrackin had no thought of letting him turn and come to the rim. He unholstered and slid a long Colt forward, letting the thunder of a shot roll along the rim, the bullet striking a yard behind the man.

"Gawdamighty!" yelled the man, springing forward now like a scared goat. "I'm bein' killed!"

Shots came up from below, bullets slapping along the rim as the fleeing man stumbled and fell downward, falling here, tumbling there, managing to keep only half to his feet. McCrackin was moving back, letting those bullets slap the rim and glance away in the air with sharp wails. Not one of them came close enough to break the little grin curling his lips.

"Ain't a danged thing they can do but waste lead!" he was chuckling when he got back to Gabriel's Trumpet. "Just showin' how they feel about gettin' beat out, I guess. Nary another'n will have guts enough to try that rim agin. Not, Gabriel," he gave the old horse an affectionate stroke along the neck, "unless they're as big a bunch of fools as we are, gettin' ourselves mixed in on this little jack-pot."

Something still held him there. He could hold all hell back by moving this way and that, taking quick shots from one place, then another. He could hold them all even if they tried to push horses over those sharp-edged rocks in the narrow gash.

Eyes on the young fellow they had made a prisoner, he swung into his saddle now, keeping himself and the white horse out of sight.

"They're headin', I'd say," he frowned, "for ol' Fort Red Bull. It's just too bad a gang like that have got the young critter. They'll maybe want to stop an' hang 'im 'fore they get back to town, but somethin' in my brisket tells me they won't. A duck like that is worth a lot in a cage, game as he was down there. It seems how I've been hearin' a lot about Red Bull of late, an' the sheriff duck who runs it to suit 'imself."

Certain that none of the gang would take a notion to turn back, he swung away. The bay snorted, stamped a wicked hoof, and turned to follow at the heels of Gabriel's Trumpet.

"An' now, maybe," McCrackin grinned, "I'm gettin' deeper an' deeper in the hoss-thief business. I ain't tellin' yuh to come, hoss." He glanced back at the bay over his shoulder. "Yo're just trailin' me."

It was more than an hour before he sighted the steel dust string again. It was about four miles away, going now at an easier pace, the mountains looming higher

at either hand, like raw tombstone slabs.

"Idaho line ain't far now," he nodded. "Guess that woman knows it."

The old man on the roan still rode limply across the saddle, the boy still leading the horse, the other kid helping the woman and the girl. Both of them constantly turned in their saddles to watch the canyon behind.

At the end of thirty minutes more McCrackin was finding a way down from the rim, the herd disappearing around a bend well ahead of him. When he rounded that bend they were still out of sight. The canyon grew narrow and as crooked as a bull-snake now, and the big bay continued to clatter along just behind.

The herd had to be over the Idaho line, and McCrackin spurred the racking Gabriel's Trumpet into a gallop when he came to another straight stretch. The herd was less than a mile away and in full sight. He had galloped less than six hundred yards before he pulled up, a bullet whistling overhead.

"Hell!" he growled, eyes widening. "Now *they'd* shoot me!"

He yanked a dirty old handkerchief that once was white from his pocket, holding it above his head, and rode on. At the end of a mile the herd had stopped to rest at a water hole, and suddenly he found himself surrounded by seven wolfish looking men, every one of them covering him from behind a rock.

"Reach, stranger!" rasped a big, black-bearded man of fifty, just to his right. "Higher! Both hands!"

"Mighty brave men, yuh are!" Gabriel's Trumpet had come to a halt. "Yuh let a woman an' some kids do all the fightin', then yuh take a fast set-in when it's all over. Why'n hell wasn't yuh down the canyon?"

"We know our own business!" The black-beard was easing forward, his rifle held in both hands. "Reach higher!"

"Don't shoot that man, Mr. Price!" The girl had swung back on her tall, steel-colored gelding. "That's the man on the white horse who helped us!"

"Just wasn't takin' chances, Miss Lawley." The black-beard lowered his rifle. "Yuh can't, in times like this."

"Thank you, mister." The girl's eyes were on McCrackin. "I don't know why you did it, but it pulled us through. These are our horses that were stolen from us two

weeks ago, and all we're trying to do is to get them back on their own range."

"An' that's a Snake Smith hoss behind 'im!" put in a small, sharp-faced little man, stepping with a limp at the left knee from behind a rock just beyond the black-beard. "Look at that brand!"

"I saw it, first thing," nodded McCrackin. "He just kinda followed my ol' Gabriel's Trumpet atter I'd knocked his owner off'n the rim with a crack of my whip."

"Did you say *Gabriel's Trumpet*, mister?" The boy who had been leading the roan had come galloping back to them, eyes big and blue, his nose an upturned button. All the rest of him was freckles under his old, once-white hat.

"That's what I call 'im, son." McCrackin nodded again. "Ain't much to look at, maybe, but he does get up an' goin' when he tries."

"Then—then," the boy stabbed a forefinger at him, "you're *Bullwhip Bill McCrackin*! An' he is, Kitty!" He fired a quick glance at the girl. "Look at that big whip on his shoulder!"

"Yuh seem to have all the answers, son." There was no way of telling whether to smile or frown. "Who are yuh?"

"Why, heck," cried the boy, "I'm Jerry Royal! Kitty, here, is my half-sister, an' she's gonna marry a fella who used to be one of your best saddle pards. Damn it," he hit his saddle horn with a small fist, "I'm talkin' about Johnny Keen. He was tellin' about you only yesterday. How he helped you bust outa jail down in Utah for shootin' a sheriff!"

"Jail-pard kinfolks, huh!" A big, one-eyed, red-headed man laughed in the rocks to McCrackin's left. "Leave it to a boy to tell all an' more'n he should!"

"Why, it was Johnny back there," the boy was rushing on, "what started that rock-slide. Johnny's a fella—"

"Hush, Jerry!" The girl lifted her hand, looking down the canyon, her face and lips white. "Johnny started the slide, yes. He was trying to take care of Uncle Dick Pope's body and fight at the same time. When—when," she half-choked, "he saw there was no other way to keep Franz Ubez and his crowd off of us, so he turned and started the slide. It was suicide. He gave his own life to save us!"

"Only he didn't give no life," frowned

McCrackin. "Thought there was somethin' 'bout that young fella that looked mighty familiar. Only Johnny Keen coulda come through a damn thing like that. Dry them tears, gal! Yore Johnny is still alive."

HE TOLD them what he knew when they moved on up to join the woman and the younger girl. The body of old Dick Pope still hung across the roan's saddle. They moved on, and lowered it to the ground. Lifting it back on the horse would not help him now; Pope was finished.

"We couldn't see all that was happening back there," explained the girl, after she had introduced her mother as Mary Royal, and the other girl as Ann. "All we could see was him start the slide."

"All the better if he'd died in it," put in the woman, her eyes hard and gray. "They'll worse than murder him in that ol' Fort Red Bull jail! Sheriff Franz Ubez has been waiting for this chance. He's back of all this horse rustlin'! His gangs raid us on the Idaho side, running cattle and horses over here. He's laughed at us too many times. When they steal from us, all we can do is steal back."

The business of running cattle and horses across state lines was an old, old game. Backed by the right kind of a sheriff, judge and prosecuting lawyer, men could get away with it for years, and the only way to fight was to steal it back. Some ranchers took everything in sight to pay for the trouble when they came, but these people seemed to have taken only what belonged to them.

"An' what," finally growled McCrackin, "do these fellas here do? Just sorter set 'round an' watch the scenery?"

"That's twice yo've as good as asked that same question!" snarled the big black-beard. "Franz Ubez an' his Big Lip Brown, head-hawg deppity, would like nothin' better'n catchin' us on the Montana side. Hell, we've been over it a dozen times—an' some real shootin' was done when we was there. Yuh might be skittish if there was a murder charge agin yuh waitin' to hang yuh!"

"An' that's only part of it!" snapped in the big, one-eyed red-head. "Mary Royal nor nobody else told us she was goin' after them brons! We coulda maybe lent some help. As it was, we headed here as soon as

we could atter findin' her gone from her ranch. We kinda figgered she'd come bustin' back this way."

The woman said nothing, making herself busy with the herd. McCrackin was no fool. Either this Mary Royal did not trust these men or she had little confidence in their fighting abilities. No one had yet offered to introduce them. Even the girl, Kitty Lawley, steered clear of it, and in spite of having seen him for the first time there was something about the big red-head that McCrackin did not like.

"Guess we'll branch off at the fork." The black-beard cleared his throat. "Don't seem to be much more we can do," he glanced sharply at McCrackin. "They'll be in the clear, anyhow, from now on. Nobody'd dare to follow crost the line in the broad daylight. Too many guns waitin' over here, an' they know it, uh, Rube?"

"Damn well right they know!" said the red-head. "It's atter the darktime that yo've got to watch for 'em, an' somethin' tells me they ain't givin' up them hosses with just one little fight."

It was not McCrackin's place to tell them to turn or not to turn at a fork ahead. For once he kept his mouth shut, merely lifting his hand in a half-hearted wave to them when they came to the fork and swung away to the right. After they were gone Kitty Lawley fell back beside him. She was silent until McCrackin prodded her with a question:

"Yuh ain't puttin' all yore money on them fellas, I guess?"

"Money?" She frowned, then tried to smile, and he could tell that she had been crying, thinking of Johnny Keen. She frowned for a second, then came out with it. "None of us bank too much on them, especially Rube Wind, the red-headed man, and Bollinger Price, the talkative dark one."

"Maybe," she added after a moment's pause to glance back down the canyon again, "it's because they are rather new in the country. They're not really ranchers. Bollinger Price came a year ago, and settled on the worn-out old silver mining property at the head of Lost Lode Canyon." She nodded northward to indicate the spur the men had taken. "Rube Wind came only last year. They buy and sell horses and cattle."

"An' that's maybe enough about Bollin-

ger Price an' Rube Wind," nodded McCrackin when she paused again. "How about them others?"

"We know probably as much as you know." She looked on ahead now. "The small, sharp-faced man calls himself Ginger Brandy. The others are drifters. Price keeps the door open for men out of work. Brandy has been with them only since early spring." There was another long, thoughtful pause. "I—I really don't know the others at all. I never saw them before until this morning. I suppose they're all right."

"Yuh ain't tellin' the truth, Kitty Lawley!" McCrackin glowered at her. "Not by a long shot! Yore mammy as good as turned her back on all of 'em. Yore brother's half-scared of 'em, an' yore kid sister is scared, *damn* scared."

"That red-head, now, with the one eye." He shook back his bulky shoulders. "He looks a heap like the fella I cracked off the rim with my whip. Some big, dark dude with a star on his chest below called 'im Big Lip Brown, an' maybe the fella callin' was yore sheriff of ol' Fort Red Bull—"

"**A**ND YOU think," she cut in, swiftly, "the same thing others think about Rube Wind?"

"Whut's that?"

"That he could be a brother to Big Lip Brown of Red Bull?"

"Queer how wimmin come 'round a thing, ain't it!" He grinned at her now. "Yuh say what *yuh* think, just what *yo're* scared to hell of, an' yuh want *me* to agree. Yuh ain't said yet that cows an' bronses are stole outa Montana, an' sleeked away to only the Lord knows where, and then sold."

"Why—why," her eyes had grown big and wide, "who told you that, Mr. McCrackin?"

"The name's Bill," he frowned. "Just plain *Bill*. I shot a fella once for callin' me Willyam, so don't start that. Better warn yore mammy. They say it ain't culturalish to take a latigo to a woman."

"But yore question, now. Why, hell, young un, I thought ever'body knowed what was goin' on. Such things are so damn old I hardly ever give 'em a second thought—"

"Look!" She reached over suddenly and caught his wrist. "Will you promise me to

help Johnny if they haven't already murdered him? Sheriff Franz Ubez and Big Lip Brown have branded him as the king-pin rustler. He has helped others get out their cattle and horses—"

"An'," he cut in with a grin, "ain't taken some for 'imself?"

"No, not a single head!" she cried, releasing his wrist and swinging back straight and tall in her saddle again. "Johnny Keen's no thief! You should know that!"

"He was a sort of a damn young fool at that." He pushed his old hat forward and thoughtfully scratched the hairy back of his neck. "He was busted as hell down in Wyomin', an' still he finds a sack of gold on a trail right atter some swift birds robbed the bank in Hoss Jaw. What does the fool do but take the money right on back to the bank, an' get lammed in jail for his pains? Me, I shot off my big mouth, an' in I get flung, atter I'd had to shoot a six-gun outa the sheriff's hand."

"Johnny told us about it!" Her eyes sparkled now. "My brother makes him tell the story over and over, almost every day. And—and you will help him!" She leaned toward him again. "I know you will, *Bill*! You don't have to tell me."

"Under one condition." He grinned again. "That is, if we come out all right, I won't have to kiss the bride. I'm down right damn bullish-headed about some things. I—"

"Just like Johnny's painted you!" she cut in, rocking back in her saddle. "He said there never was but one Bullwhip Bill, never would be another, and—and," her eyes sparkled, "no one in all the world would ever want to see a *second* Bullwhip Bill McCrackin! Oh, look! What's that coming down the slope!"

"A rock, nigh as big as a wagon!" He had glanced up to their right. The canyon was narrow here, the walls several hundred feet high and sloping steeply. "Looks like we're gettin' a short-notice hearin' from somebody tryin' to start a slide on us!"

It was far up there, a big, gray shape tipped over the edge of the rim and speeding downward, bouncing here with a tremendous crash, rolling there for rods, gathering momentum all the time and starting other rocks slipping and sliding. Below it strung the line of horses, the woman, the boy and the girl screaming and yelling,

waving their hats, rushing the herd into a stampede to get it out of the way.

"Watch yoreself, yuh little fool!" bawled McCrackin as Kitty Lawley was suddenly spurring forward, her face chalk white with terror. "Yuh can't do nothin' but git killed if that slide starts."

His old rifle was up, Gabriel's Trumpet swung to a halt. High up there on the rim he had caught a glimpse of a man darting back in the rocks. In a second another showed. Now the two were getting behind another rock with a long pole to pry it loose and start it bounding down in the rising dust.

He opened fire, paying no attention to the horses ahead of him. His only thought was to stop that rock-rolling before it was too late. His second shot was bringing results. He saw a man stagger backward, both hands going to his stomach, and then the man was falling, pitching head-first out of sight, the other turning to flee.

The first big rock was not enough. It started other stones, but a deep break along in the face of the slope stopped them. The larger stone jumped it, leaped high in the air over a sixty or seventy-foot drop, and then shattered itself to bits on a broad, flat ledge.

"Push 'em hard!" yelled McCrackin, swinging on now, rifle at ready. "Give 'em hell!"

With the woman, the little girl and the boy firing six-shooters as they waved their hats, the herd had broken into a run. Some of the animals reared and pawed the rumps of others to speed them up.

"An' that," nodded McCrackin as he grimly galloped on, "was just a whole lot of hossplay for nothin'. It only shows a fella's hand when he mighta kept it behind 'im."

Chapter III

BAD BLOOD IN RED BULL

"YOU'RE BOTH damned fools, always were, always will be, and I believe Rube's the worst I've ever seen! I should just bat Rube's brains out with a .45 and toss his carcass off the cliffs out a rear window and let the river take him away."

It was long after midnight three days after the big, dark half-breed sheriff of Red

Bull and his gang had failed to stop the steel-dust string from going over the Idaho line. His visitors had come slipping into town only after it had grown quiet and they could leave their horses in the little pine thicket beyond the head of the street. They came on foot to the thick-walled old fort built six hundred feet above the rushing river.

The red-headed, Big Lip Brown stood guard on the front porch facing the street. Franz Ubez sat behind his wide desk in the northwest corner of the room, once the trade room of old Fort Red Bull.

Bollinger Price and big Rube Wind sat as quietly as they could, made dry-lipped in less than a minute by the sheriff's cursings. They watched him across the desk, each with his hat on his knee.

"Rolling that rock down!" Ubez turned and spat on the floor. "Getting a man's guts shot out! Not accomplishing a damned thing other than to completely turn your hand to those people!"

"It was Rube's idea, like I said." Price cleared his throat gently. "His idea, too, to go down an' meet the herd atter we'd seen it comin'. We thought it'd look friendly, like we was wantin' to help out, an' that fool McCrackin had to show up!"

"And Bullwhip Bill McCrackin's in it to the eyes now," Ubez leaned forward. "Who knows but what he followed you monks over here tonight?"

"But," put in Wind, "we ain't seen 'im since the other mornin'! I reckon he ain't even stayin' at the Royal outfit!"

"You don't reckon anything when it comes to that devil!" Ubez hit the desk with his fist. "I have men who know all about him, how he wire-works his way into a deal, and how it's been that nobody seems to be able to kill him!"

"Bullwhip Bill McCrackin," he was easing back in his chair, voice lowered, "would be worth exactly a thousand dollars in gold to me—dead or alive. And," he added with a sudden tightening of his lips, "I wouldn't ask whether the bullet that stopped him hit him from the front or from behind."

"Hell, Franz," Wind's one good eye, the right one, had widened, "yuh act like yore scared to hell of 'im!"

"I'm afraid of no man living!" The sheriff was rocking forward again, a yellow flush of his quick rage coming back to his

face. I'm only afraid of what he'll do to the rest of you punks. We have everything in our own hands here. I'll never spoil it, but fools like you two can. I'd just feel safer if he was out of the way."

"He'll come to help Johnny Keen." Wind nodded to the carefully closed outer door. "Yuh can bet on that from just the little talk I heard 'tween him, the boy an' the purty gal, but there's one thing shore. No man was ever taken from ol' Fort Red Bull. No man ever got so much as inside when he wasn't wanted, an' there was a hell of a lot of Indians what tried it, back yonder in the fightin' days. It's queer to see yuh scared, Franz."

"Say that again," Ubez came half out of his chair, "And I'll knock that other eye out of your head!"

"Set an' keep yore chair cool, Franz." Rube Wind's right eye had grown narrow and glinty. He would take a great deal to keep himself from getting into a fight. "Yuh ain't scarin' me. Hell, I'm yore best friend's half-brother. Now, don't start to rip!" He held up a big hand. "I ain't seen yuh of late but what yuh start in to talk about the times yo've had to take me outa jail, an', yeah," he nodded and forced a little grin, "the pen now an' then, the worst bein' for jobs in yore interest an' me takin' it on the chin for yuh."

"McCrackin doesn't scare me." Ubez dropped back in his chair. "It's what he can do to people, the way he can stir up hell all over, pitting the fools against the smart, giving the fools a chance to tear hell out of things. The human race is worse than wolves. All you have to do with a man is to joker him about a little, and he's at your throat or ripping your belly apart with bullets or blades."

They had been together a long time in things like this. Franz Ubez was the brains, especially when it came to Rube Wind. Wind had always fought back at the law. Franz Ubez had made it his tool, seeking his shelter first in court-house cliques until he was where he wanted to be.

It was rather a simple business after all. Rarely in his travels had Franz Ubez failed to come upon a town where he could not find some high power who had a background better kept in a dark closet than aired to public view. Either that or some big-headed fellow who was deep in double

dealing. Men like that were always rank cowards, afraid of going to jail or losing an ounce of power. A bold man could bluff them. He never had to know it all. Two or three hints properly dropped startled them out of their boots. None wanted a man to delve too far in the past or the present when it smacked of jailhouse doors and disgrace.

Red Bull a few years ago had been made to order. Franz Ubez had come to town only the day before seven slick-faced youths from Wyoming had made a bold attempt to rob the little bank. With everybody shouting and yelling at the last minute, he had simply gone into action from an upstairs window in the Red Bull Hotel, killing four of the youths as they swept down the street. The rest of the boys made good their escape by wheeling into an alleyway after shooting down old Sheriff Billy Bean. Before nightfall, everybody acclaiming Franz Ubez the hero of the hour and had made him sheriff.

To all men, women and children of the town and the surrounding rangelands, Red Bull had made a great decision. Supposedly picking up a long-cold trail the next morning at dawn, the new sheriff had set out alone, carrying a rifle and one of the sawed-offs and his brace of handsome, gold and silver-mounted Frontiers with their diamond and ruby-studded ivory butts. Late that same night he had returned with the three boys who had escaped, each dead and roped across the saddle of his horse. They had been found hiding in an old line cabin less than twenty miles from town.

IT WAS only natural that Franz Ubez had failed to return the eleven thousand dollars, mostly in gold and silver, that had been taken from the bank. Outlaws were in the habit of hiding their loot and waiting for the hunt to cool, but many men who had known the big, dark Ubez in the past might have smiled behind their hands. Some might have guessed that the three youths were waiting for him there in the old cabin; some might have guessed that the four who had died in front of the Red Bull Hotel had been only young smart-Alecs roped into a deal to be killed. Wiping out the last three young punks who had helped to rope in the others, had settled all chance of talk or blackmail, and their going by the way had saved a fat split of the loot.

Franz Ubez could fool young fellows who thought they were big and smart, but he could never fool Rube Wind. Rube Wind was hard, a man who trusted few men on earth. Big Lip Brown, his half-brother, was the one man to keep him in line if he lost his head and wanted to fight; and yet Franz Ubez had always found that he could trust him, as one wolf another wolf.

In spite of his blustering air, Bollinger Price was the weaker one when it came to the smell of smoke. He was the smooth one when it came to going on a job and making people around him think he was something he was not. He had guided dozens of drives back and forth across the line, always managing to keep himself in the clear and strictly on the sidelines while other men faced the smoke. He cleared his throat again, voice careful as he spoke.

"Yuh allus give us hell, Franz, for the least little thing that sorter backfires. Like that fella gettin' shot, now. That squirt who was fool enough to call 'imself Ginger Brandy. We never trusted 'im from the start, though yuh sent 'im to us, an'—"

"He was in jail for stealing a saddle!" snapped in the sheriff. "That meant that he was going to steal a horse somewhere to go under it. He didn't deny it."

"Which could be natural," nodded Rube Wind, right eye still hard. "Not, now," he quickly held up his big right hand, "that I'm sayin' yo're a sucker! Maybe he was all right. Maybe I was wrong. I took 'im up that slope just to try 'im out, to see what he would do. He maybe guessed that that rock wouldn't do much damage—"

"And to try a man's loyalty," the sheriff was again leaning forward, "you have him killed. And then, of course," he opened his big hands and closed them into lumpy fists, "when he's dead you know he was loyal. I think you're a hell of a fool to try anybody!"

"But as I was sayin'," again Bollinger Price was clearing his throat, a man trying to keep the peace, "yuh give us hell for the mistakes, but yuh never hand out any pats on the back. Like, for instance, that fine string of saddle stock what was whipped crost the line last night while we let a string from this side go through. We—"

"Franz!" The front door had suddenly opened. It was Big Lip Brown, letting a

tall, hook-nosed cowboy stagger in beside him. "Look at Hook Smith!"

"It's the Fire Ball string we got last night." Smith staggered as he came forward, the three men at the desk on their feet, staring, faces suddenly white. Each of them could see blood seeping from either corner of Smith's mouth; each knew him as one of the best men among them when it came to handling cattle and horses across the line. "Man with a bullwhip, it was. I—"

"Catch 'im!" gasped the sheriff as Smith slumped to his knees. "Damn it, Hook's been shot."

"I've been murdered, yuh might say." Smith tried to grin as Rube Wind and Bollinger Price leaped to him. "Hit low. Little to the right side, but it's bad an' I know it, only that ain't here nor yonder. It's the Fire Ball string I come to tell about. Best bunch of horses since the Royal stuff got jerked away from us. Ever' head worth a fancy price if we'd just hung on to 'em. Nobody followed us last night. Nobody we could see. I thought that was queer. Didn't—like it. Allus kinda like a fight. Makes me feel—safer, somehow."

"Help him into that chair!" ordered the sheriff. "Don't stand there just holding him! Get him a shot of whiskey, Lip! Fill a glass and let 'im down it! He looks ready to go out on us."

"I am—goin' out." In the chair Smith shook his head doggedly. "Made the ride just to tell yuh. Gimme that whiskey quick, Lip! There!" He grabbed the glass, Brown holding on to it to steady it, and lifted it to his lips, gulping the whiskey down.

"That's—better. Nothin' hits a fella quicker, 'specially when he's got a ball of lead in his guts." He rubbed the sagging and soggy right side of his shirt. "We was fightin' like hell at the start. Some of the boys are still trailin' the herd, an' it's bein' pushed straight west, straight crost the river. I saw it from the top of Signal Butte, then I burned wind straight on here, takin' all the short-cuts."

"Where'll they cross the river, Hook?" The sheriff's voice had become gentle as he placed a big hand on the wounded man's shoulder. "Just where do you think? West of Signal Butte?"

"Can't cross there, Franz!" put in Brown. "Not for two or three miles up or

down. Banks are too high. Hell, they'd only kill ever' head jumpin' 'em off them bluffs!"

"Just know—what—it—looked like." In spite of the strong whiskey, Smith was slumping in his chair, Ubez and Wind trying to hold him upright. "Thank—I'd better—have another—drink!"

"Hold yourself, Hook!" The sheriff slammed him back in the chair. "We've got to know everything you know, then we'll cut them off. Buck up, fellow! Hurry with that whiskey, Lip!"

"Kinda wastin' good spirits, I think, Franz." Price was in front of Smith, lifting his face and staring into his eyes. "It looks to me like this dead-game cowboy has just about put in his last chip. He's a goner!" He straightened and stepped back. "Just as easy as that."

"Listen!" Wind had lifted his head, staring at the ceiling, right eye big and round. "Seems to me like I'm hearin' things."

"You are!" Ubez had suddenly released Smith's shoulders, letting him slump over the side of the chair and roll on loosely to the floor. "Rout out the boys down the street, Lip! That's gunfire!"

"Gunfire in the north, yeah!" nodded Wind. "Maybe they run afoul of some of the other boys an' they're tryin' to push 'em straight into Red Bull an' right in yore hands, Franz."

All three of them could hear it after Big Lip Brown had gone bolting out the door, the dead man on the floor unnoticed now. To northward sounds were rolling as if coming down the river.

"McCrackin." The sheriff half-whispered the word. "I told you what the old devil could do."

"We'd better duck out while we can." Wind glanced at Price. "Goin' to be a crowd 'round this ol' jail soon, an' Franz doesn't want us seen by anybody in this town what ain't in with us. Come on. Move it pronto."

"Just one thing, Franz." Price was already moving toward the door. "Better watch Johnny Keen back yonder in that jail. This might be a double play."

"Get out!" hissed Ubez. "I'll handle that. Maybe you can do something on the sidelines. No prisoner ever got away from me!"

IT WAS more than mere gunfire up the river. It was running horses—a flying Fire Ball string headed back for Idaho—and desperately riding men, men on the point and men behind. As these sixteen men drove and led the herd, other men tried to close in from behind and the flanks, weaving, rocking and bobbing in their saddles. Rifles squirted their yard-long blasts of flame, the men with the horses fought back, and Bullwhip Bill McCrackin sent his long blacksnake whip flying down on the backs of the animals lagging behind.

Bullwhip Bill McCrackin was helping take a herd back home that he had deliberately helped across the line the night before. He had known old John Buck of the Fire Ball for more than twenty years. John was a man he could trust with his life, and yet it had been one of the hardest things he had ever tried to do to convince the short, squatty old horseman that he could stop the rustling by placing his picked herd of horses close to the line rustlers as not.

"Yo're crazy as hell!" Buck had roared after McCrackin had gone right to the Fire Ball. "Damn it, I'm havin' all I can do now to keep 'em from bein' rustled now. I know them horses are bein' watched night an' day. I've got my best men handlin' that herd in the Sink Hole, men I know I can trust."

"Now yuh want me to have some jackass pretendin' whiskey peddler come along an' get 'em drunk. Then yuh want 'em all to pretend they're in a fight, this one an' that one ridin' off, givin' the rustler crowd a wide-open sweep. Hell! An' hell agin! Yo're worse off in the head than I thought."

"But yo've still got the point in yore think head." McCrackin had grinned at him in the huge, log-walled old living room of the Fire Ball. "Yuh put 'em there an' let 'em go. There'll be nobody to follow. Nobody, I mean, but me. I'll trail the herd. I'll see right where it goes. Yuh can trail me, if yuh wanta think I'm goin' in the rustlin' business myself."

"Oh, go to hell!"

"Aim to, when my time comes." McCrackin had gouged him with his thumb. "I'd be too lonesome in the other place,

not seein' yuh 'round now an' then. Now listen, yuh damned ol' fool. I mighta gone to somebody with some sense, but I was allus kinda sorry for wornout bats like yuh. Now lis'en to me. . . ."

And John Buck had finally listened, hearing him out. By the time he had a few more hours sleep and a good breakfast he had been all out for the plan.

"Yuh do have an idea now an' then," he had grinned. "Some of 'em go through, but," he had struck one more sour note, "if this fails I'm gonna shoot yuh as shore as yo're settin' here at this table."

Men were riding now, many men up and down the line for miles. Pockets in the hills had been combed. Any Montana cattle or horses found on the Idaho side were being thrown back regardless of who might have claimed them, and the one big stronghold east of the river and north of old Fort Red Bull had been invaded. McCrackin had trailed the stolen Fire Ball herd like a ghost in the darkness, not a shot being fired. Once he had seen exactly where those Fire Ball horses were going he had shot the word back across the line. No gangs of men had come storming out for war, but they had come one after the other, keeping to the low places, watching the high ones for the look-outs.

And it had been the way to get it done. Men riding in a body as they had tried it often before would have been whipped back. Gangs would have suddenly opened fire on them from the high places, forcing them to turn and flee.

They had swept it clean tonight, finding more horses than any man had ever dreamed. Now they were pouring down the east bank of the river with Red Bull not much more than a mile away. The herd had started pointing down through a break to the water.

It looked like rank suicide to many of them, but the devil with the bullwhip was still calling the tune. With the last of the horses headed down in the break, eight of the riders swung back with McCrackin, sheltering their horses behind rocks and trees, waiting for the pursuing mob.

The gun work was fast while it lasted. Horses snorting and plunging, one going down here and there, men spilling from their saddles with bullets in them. The battle raged for ten minutes—and then the

men who had turned to make their stand were fleeing, McCrackin and old John Buck the last to go.

"They're still shootin' at the rocks an' trees up there." McCrackin grinned when they reached the edge of the river. "Soon that gang back there will be followin' to beat hell, an' the men we've got planted all along them rims ahead will pour it into 'em."

"But yuh maybe ain't seen it all, yuh ol' bat." Buck was still looking back up the slope. "We was close enough up there for me to see the lights of Red Bull. There's a mob pourin' outa town, an' that mob's gonna be in the fightin'."

"The more the merrier," nodded McCrackin. "The boys on the rims can take 'em. I'm goin' after Johnny Keen now, an' yuh can go on with yore rat killin'."

"They'll murder yuh, Bill!" Alarm filled the old horseman's eyes. "Damn it, three thousand Indians once stormed ol' Fort Red Bull, an' ever' one of 'em was turned back! It'd take an army of soldiers with cannons to bust Franz Ubez's walls down, an' then I don't know that they'd get in through them thick walls."

"Just why I'm goin' 'er alone." McCrackin glanced behind them once more. "Get along with that herd. Me an' Johnny can maybe join yuh in a little while. Me an' ol' Gabriel's Trumpet are turnin' down the river. May even have to swim before we're through, but I'm shore as hell gonna take Johnny outa that jail. Now get goin'."

There was no use in trying to stop him, and Buck rode on, splashing rapidly across the ford. Having borrowed three long ropes besides his own saddle rope, McCrackin turned down the river, hugging the darkness of the overhanging rocks.

It was like he had thought, almost. There were places where it looked as if he would have to swim for it, but he managed them by keeping his feet crossed around his saddle horn. Above him, several times, he heard hoofs, one gang of men after another racing up the river. As he neared the underside of the town itself he heard firing breaking out in the distance, and he knew that men along the rims of the gorge were opening up on rivers pursuing the herd.

Now he swung up on a narrow shelf above the water, following it to a wider one covered with brush and a few dwarfed

piners. Here he was right below the old fort, and it was just as John Buck had said up the river.

Established as a trading post in the far frontier long before Benetsee, the half-breed, discovered gold in Montana in '52, old Fort Red Bull had never been defeated in any try. Its history from the start had been one of strife and blood, a scene of more than sixty fights and probably a thousand mere brawls. Tales had it that the bodies of more than two hundred and fifty Cheyenne and Sioux braves had been flung over the cliffs in a single day into the roaring river below.

But none of the bloody history of old Fort Red Bull mattered now. His business for the moment was with Franz Ubez. Even in the old days the bearded and buckskinned owners of the fort had had no thought of watching the river side for attack. A simple forethought had caused them to set the two-yard-thick wall even with the rim, making it impossible for a single war-painted savage to sneak in behind them while they were fighting from the front and flanks of the fort.

In a few minutes Bullwhip Bill McCrackin was going up, his back loaded with rope, a human spider on a wall in the darkness, long old blacksnake streaking upward now and then for its rawhide lash to wrap itself around a projecting spur of rock. . . .

Chapter V

SATAN'S SIDEWINDER

"HE'S GONE, Franz!"

It was less than an hour after the distant firing in the hills west of the river had died away. Big Lip Brown had just come out of the corridor of the jail. Taking the keys twice, Ubez had gone back into the corridor to peer into the old cell overhanging the river, seeing what he had thought was his prisoner lying on the bunk in the dim light, the blankets covering him to the ears.

Johnny Keen had been a man he had been certain he was going to hang, and hanging was a business with Franz Ubez. Despite all his caution tonight it had taken the more curious Big Lip Brown to discover that Keen was gone, that the long bundle on the

bunk was not a man at all but a mere rumpling of the blankets, bundles of old newspapers that had been stacked in a corner and a pair of worn-out saddle bags stuffed with soiled clothing.

Somebody had helped Johnny Keen pull a fast one. Brown had seen that by shining a lantern's light through the bars of the door. He had seen that the old screen over the window had been cut. A moment later, yelling for help, he had seen the end of a rope hanging to a ring in the wall and extending out the window straight down the cliffs.

It was like looking at the end of the world when Franz Ubez came charging into the cell and glared out the window with six men behind him. There had not been many reports coming back to him from the men who had set out after the Fire Ball herd. The few reports that had come had not been good. Men were being killed west of the river, attacked from the high rims, the gunfire raking them out of their saddles, holding them up here and there, making them travel like snails.

And now, staring out that window, he saw something else to make his blood boil. There was a big white horse on the other side of the river, up there now in the just-rising moonlight. Two men were on his back.

"That's that damned McCrackin! That's Keen with 'im! Look! The old devil's taunting me! Taunting me!"

"Get a rifle, Franz!" Brown wheeled, smashing into the men behind him. "Hurry, yuh damn fools!"

"Horses are out front!" Ubez wheeled now. "Damn the rifle, he's already fading in the brush and rocks!"

He was a madman on the rush. With Big Lip Brown behind him, always in his shadow, Ubez raced out the corridor, through the office and to the short porch. In a minute he was swinging into a big saddle, the others following.

No one knew what Franz Ubez was going to do, but none had ever seen him any wilder. Leaving the jail without a single guard, his one prisoner gone, a man on whom he might have laid the blame for many things that had been happening across the line, he was like a wild bird of prey crowded forward in his saddle, his eyes glaring ahead.

"Taunting me!" He snarled it over and over. "A damned old rake like that taking a prisoner out of my jail!"

After they had crossed the river gunfire could be heard ahead, but he was not pulling up to listen to it. Nothing mattered but that big white horse, looking like a moving tombstone as the light of the moon picked it out of the shadows.

"He's heading for Wildcat Gorge!"

"It may be a trap, Franz!" Growing alarm was in even Big Lip Brown's tone now, but it was going unheeded.

They were in the gorge now, in places dark at the bends, bright in the others. Riding like a madman yet, at a pace no horse could stand for more than a mile or two, Ubez had already swung up a rifle from a boot under his left stirrup leather. He opened fire twice, shooting at that wild run only to see the white horse in the distance swing around another bend and disappear.

"She's gettin' mighty narrow in here, Franz!"

It was rougher going now, but he did not slack the pace, not even knowing that his horse was blowing like a blacksmith's bellows. Only one idea burned in his thoughts, and that was to stop that white horse ahead and to kill both those men. . . .

"THIS IS the right place, I reckon, Johnny." Bullwhip Bill was pulling up his old Gabriel's Trumpet at last. "We take 'em here or never. Hit the rocks with my ol' Winchester, an' I'll see what I can do."

He gave the old horse a furious slap with his hat as they swung down, and the tired Gabriel's Trumpet galloped on, heading for a little pine thicket seventy or eighty yards away. The long blacksnake was ready, the *peso* in place on the hard lash.

It was narrow here, a place where only one man could come through at a time. Hoofs already sounding in the distance, Johnny Keen had dodged into the rocks.

"We want Ubez an' the fella called Big Lip," McCrackin had told him. "Others are maybe just as damn mean an' need killin' as much, but once yuh take the big hawks outa a pen, the little ones are left to shift for 'emselves an' don't count too much."

Now the hoofs were close. They heard a horse stumble and fall on the rough ground.

Ubez was first, his horse stumbling as he came through the narrow pass. McCrackin let him get well in range, then the long whip was shooting forward as the stumbling horse straightened. The old *peso* made a sickening *smack!* above the noise of the hoofs, then it was slinging back and striking again, this time flying straight for the forehead of the second rider. There was no noise this time, for Johnny Keen was filling the gorge with one long, crashing report of the old Winchester, just as a man behind the falling Big Lip Brown swung up a six-shooter to try to make it a fight. . . .

"Yuh didn't have a chance, Mr. Ubez; didn't aim to give yuh an' yore deppity one. Yuh ain't the kinda fellas who'd ever give anybody a chance like one of them snowballs in hell yuh hear so much talk about."

It was a long time before Franz Ubez opened his eyes, finding himself lying there on the ground, wrists locked behind him in his own handcuffs. To his left sprawled the figure of Big Lip Brown, the moonlight pouring down on him. Even yet Franz Ubez did not know what had happened to him or to Brown.

"Only one of yore men tried to show fight, Mr. Ubez." McCrackin's voice was a lazy drone as he sat on a rock a couple of yards away. "He's dead, which is all right, too, I reckon. Furnishes a hoss for Johnny to ride the rest of the way crost the Idaho line. I know a sheriff fella up Salmon River way who still has a couple of ol' warrants for yuh two. Kinda decent fella, that sheriff is. Maybe he'll be glad to see yuh over on his side of the line."

"You can't take me across that line!" Ubez was struggling, trying to rise. "Who in hell do you think you are?"

"Let's not go into all that." McCrackin was on his feet now and hitching up his shabby old gun belts, bullwhip blacksnake coiled around his shoulder. "We don't aim to take yuh crost no line. Hell, Mr. Ubez, we're just gonna load yuh on yore saddle, yuh an' Big Lip, an' yore hoss is most apt to follow mine. Don't blame me if some hoss an' cowmen on the other side wanta talk to yuh a little—by hand—when yore hoss takes yuh over to 'em."

"Wanta sorter gimme a hand, Johnny?"



ROUND-UP

THE MAIL brought us a letter the other day from our old friend Nevada Dick. Dick is one of the few remaining genuine old-time Westerners who knows the West first-hand. He spent time as a rancher in Nevada, then roamed years away prospecting in the Southwest deserts, and finally hit the Old Eastern trail.

He has a horse farm now, or—we guess, you'd call it—a “ranch” in Jersey where he owns a small cavvy of horses. You can find him there in Madison Square Garden when the rodeo comes to town.

Dick—for our money—is one of the youngest guys still alive who knew the West during its dramatic period of growth and glory.

Dear Gang:

King Fisher was one of the toughest gunmen of the old Tombstone days. I don't think many of the Big Book outfit are familiar with his true story. I've been talking with some of the old-timers I know and kinda checking up, and here's what I found out. I think it makes interesting reading, and hope you do. . . .

Little did the debonair sheriff of Uvalde County, Texas, know that in accepting the invitation of his amigo, Ben Thompson, City Marshal of Austin, he had delivered himself into the hands of Fate, and dealt himself a hand from the stacked deck of the Grim Reaper.

“King” Fisher was one of those colorful characters who trod the stage of time, performed his act, took his curtain call, and then disappeared into the wings to the land of oblivion.

From his earliest childhood King Fisher's career had been a tempestuous existence, doomed to end in gunsmoke. Following the Civil War, the boy's father, John King Fisher, Sr. had left his home in Kentucky, and migrated to Texas, taking with him his motherless son, John King Fisher, Jr. He was an inveterate rebel, a hater of all Yankees and every thing they stood for. Fisher's “Dam-yankee” outbreaks soon got him into hot water with the Reconstruction element of Fort Worth. That outbreak ended in gunsmoke and orphaned Junior.

Following his father's death the homeless waif lived a precarious life as a mendicant in Fort Worth. Then he drifted southward, until he reached the neighborhood of Goliad where he found more congenial surroundings.

King was big for his age, black-haired,

freckled-faced, with exceptionally long, spindly legs. One memorial day he approached the door of old Doc White, and asked for work.

"What might your name be?" inquired the rancher.

"I'm called King Fisher" answered the lad.

Rancher White laughed and said, "That's a plumb good name for you, my lad. You shore look like one of them birds." And so, from that day until his death, the lad's first name became obsolete, and he was never called anything except "King Fisher."

King was soon firmly established in his new environment, and was a welcome guest at all ranches in the vicinity. He spent most of his time at the White Ranch or Charlie Vivian's spread, where he was especially welcomed by the Vivian's daughter Sarah.

In 1869 the neighborhood of Goliad becoming too populated to satisfy the original settlers, and the White and Vivian families, along with other neighbors decided to move. Beyond the Nueces lay a stockman's paradise, and soon Old Doc White, elected chief, gathered his band together and prepared for the pasear, his scouts having selected a site on Pendercia Creek, now known as Dimmit County. Young King asked permission to accompany the party, but his request was rejected. Doc White said it was a man's country and no place for a younker.

The lad took Doc's orders and remained behind, although keenly missing the girl Sarah. Sad-eyed he watched her depart with her family, vowing that he would follow someday.

Upon reaching their destination, the half-dozen families built their thatched roofed cabins and turned loose their herds upon the virgin range. No law existed other than what a man carried on his hip. Determined to be law-abiding citizens, the settlers elected Old Doc White Justice of the Peace to keep law and order.

Nature had amply provided forage for the care of the livestock, but the settlers found themselves helpless in protecting cattle against the forays of rustlers. Across the Rio Grande in Nacimientto and Chohuila, outlaw bands had firmly ensconced themselves, along with hundreds of run-

away slaves and terrorized the country.

Soon the Pendercia Settlement became a target for all border ruffians, whose raids soon reduced the original herds of the Goliad settlers to a skeleton herd. Desperately Doc White dispatched an emissary to Goliad requesting others to join him and put down his enemies. None, however, felt able to risk their stock to venture into the unsettled country.

Following the departure of his friends, King Fisher had not remained idle. Left to shift for himself, the lad had joined the ranks of the Burtons, consisting of old and young Wes and Bill—a couple of rustlers. In the capable hands of Old Wes, King Fisher had developed into an expert gunman, and a power to be reckoned with. He had developed into a proverbial "bad weed," now man grown.

Although he was the youngest of the foursome, he had become leader already. Learning of the chaotic conditions around Pendercia, he called together his forces, and headed for the settlement. Not long after he arrived there, he and his sweetheart Sarah Vivian were married by Justice of the Peace White, who recognized the youth's ability, and appointed him a deputy sheriff. His orders were to clean the range of the Mexican border marauders.

Before accepting the appointment, King had reached a tacit understanding. King and his band could raid to their heart's content—providing they left alone the herds of the Goliad settlers. Increasing his band, King was soon raiding the Mexican ranchos, and within a short period became fabulously rich through his dealings in "wet" stock.

In 1874 the Texas legislature voted a special commission to Captain Leander H. McNeely, to organize a body of Texas Rangers and stamp out the lawlessness existing along the border. Adjutant-General Steel soon after issued his famous Texas Bible in which was listed over five thousand names of men wanted by the state of Texas. In it was the name of King Fisher, charged with being a rustler, and murderer of seventeen men.

King had by now firmly entrenched himself in the community. In his band now were over two dozen outlaws, many of them listed in the Bible. As sheriff he

faithfully performed his official duties, at the same time openly affiliating himself with the rustlers, of whom he was the leader.

The spring of 1876 found the sagacious Captain McNeely and his body of Rangers in camp at Carrizo Springs, a dozen miles northwest of King's headquarters. Visiting the general store run by Levi English, who had often suffered at the hands of the rustlers, he elicited much valuable information about the band, and he then set out for King's rancho.

Surrounding the place, the intrepid Rangers—led by the indomitable Captain—charged headlong into the outlaw camp, capturing Bud Obenchain, Billy Templeton, Albert Roberts, Billy Wainwright, Wes and Bill Burton, and their leader King Fisher.

There was no mistaking the leader King, now a man six-foot in height, weighing in the neighborhood of two hundred, with wavy black hair and a drooping mustache. A wide white sombrero crowned his head, and a white shirt of fine silk texture set off the bright red bandana knotted about his throat. A fancy carved belt supported a pearl-handled Colt over each hip. His most outstanding piece of garb was a pair of genuine Bengal tigerskin chaps, of which he was inordinately proud, and which—according to rumor had been purloined from a traveling circus. A traveling circus which now missed, strangely, one genuine Bengal tiger.

As the Rangers rode in, the rustlers went for their guns, but a word from their leader prevented bloodshed. King himself made no effort to offer resistance. Favoring the Ranger Captain with a broad grin, he said:

"Reckon you got us cold, Cap'n."

"Correct," snapped McNeely, coldly surveying the leader. Disarming their captives and placing them in handcuffs, the outlaws were placed upon horses, and then preparations were made to transport them to Eagle Pass.

Before setting out the Captain called Mrs. Fisher, warning her that should any attempt be made at rescuing the prisoners, all of them would be shot on the spot. Captain McNeely was notorious as the advocate of the old Spanish law of *La Ley de Fuga*—tricking a prisoner into attempt-

escape, and then shooting him down. It was dusk as the cavalcade left Pendencia, but the Rangers and their prisoners covered the forty-mile journey to Eagle Pass by morning. Here the prisoners were entered in jail and booked on McNeely's charge.

"What charge are you holding King Fisher on, Captain?" asked the jailor. McNeely consulted his note book, then replied. "Hold him for killing these three men. He gave their names."

"Won't do no good, I'm afraid, he's got a heap of friends."

The following day saw the jailer's prophecy fulfilled. Captain McNeely and his men returned from another forage, and, nearing Eagle Pass, observed a party of horsemen coming towards them. It proved to be King Fisher and his men.

"What the hell you doing here?" rasped McNeely, his hand on his gun.

King Fisher grinned at the Ranger's crest-fallen face, and answered. "I told you that you didn't have nothing on me."

"How did you get out?" demanded McNeely.

"Made Bond."

"How much?"

"Twenty thousand," replied the rustler.

"Did you make the bond for your men too?"

"Sure," smiled King.

Captain McNeely chewed viciously on his cheroot, then after a moment of deep thought, said: "Well, King, I didn't get you this time, but keep on and you'll either be buzzard meat, or in the Pen."

With an elaborate bow, King and his band circled the Rangers, and continued their journey towards Pendencia.

Following this episode, no further attacks were made upon the King at his headquarters, but the Rangers still sought an opportunity of corralling him. Finally King, caught alone in a saloon in Eagle Pass, was arrested by Ranger Allen and three companions.

"You'll not get off as easy this time amigo," said Allen. "I'm trailing you to Laredo."

The idea of being taken so far from his usual haunts did not set well with the King, but he only smiled and replied: "We'll see about that, later."

King was not handcuffed, but placed upon a mule, with his feet securely tied

beneath the animal's belly. There placed in the center of a string of pack animals, he rode with the party as they set out for Laredo.

As the pack train of the Rangers wended its way along the Rio bank, the astute King Fisher acted. Off came the wide brimmed white hat. Shouting at the top of his lungs, he rushed the animals ahead, causing them to stampede, then jumped his own mount over the embankment and crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico to sanctuary.

At a later period, the King again found himself arrested, charged with the slaying of one Bill Daughterty. He was placed on trial at Eagle Pass. The trial proceeded in an orderly manner, until the prosecuting attorney demanded that the jury render a verdict of Guilty against the prisoner. Then things began to happen.

Into the court room marched twenty-five heavily armed men, all friends of the defendant, and without a word they took up stations along the walls of the room. Deadly silence followed, and then the pris-

oner requested permission of the judge to address the jury on his own behalf. Permission was granted, and King Fisher said:

"Gentlemen of the jury, I am not inclined to leave the matter in your hands, without first stating that I would greatly appreciate hearing your foreman pronounce the words 'Not Guilty'."

Without leaving the jury-box, the twelve good men and wise, went into a huddle. Following a whispered conference the foreman arose, and facing the judge to announce a verdict had been arrived at. Instructed to deliver the decision, the foreman pronounced the prisoner, Not Guilty.

King Fisher then rose and, favoring the court with a smile, thanked one and all for their indulgence, after which he stepped into an aisle, and departed.

King Fisher then moved from the Penencia Creek Settlement and established his 7 D ranch in Uvalde County. There he was elected sheriff, to end his days serving justice.

Nevada Dick

GUN-DEVILS OF HAPPY VALLEY

(Continued from page 57)

he would have given a rattler. Stallion's gun arm fell and he crumpled, Cole's bullet in his heart.

Cole went to the floor, pulling Milly down, as a sleet of lead poured in the window. Lying there, he spoke aloud, but not to the girl. "That's it, dad," he muttered. "There it is. Rest easy."

Drawn by the shooting, the nesters were sweeping the alley from both directions. Leaderless, the Tuxbry men and those who owed allegiance to Stallings, were scattering like quail, striving only for escape from a doom bred by long and bitter hatred. Lasso Linden came rushing to the window, beside which Cole and Milly sat, shaking out six swift loads at the scurrying figures.

"There they go," he hollered. "Look at 'em run, the sons of dogs." He was laughing, crying, all at once. He turned a tear-streaked face to Cole. "Now mebbby the boys won't treat me like I was mud under their boots. They crucified me for playin' poker with Bill Graeme an' John Tuxbry. Figgered I was gettin' rich while they was

starvin'. I was starvin' too, you hear me. Ever' cent I won went into good guns an' bullets that them boys is usin' out there now. I—"

He choked, got himself together and darted from the room, crying war against those who had hired out to gain a choking control of Happy Valley. Cole looked at Milly and she looked at him. As if by spoken consent, they came up, facing one another. He saw her face clearly now, saw the warm glow in her eyes. It soothed him and all the ugly, impelling force that had driven him ebbed from his mind. Her hand found his sleeve and then she was in his arms, her lips against his.

"Cole. Cole. Thank God."

"For more than you mean, sweetheart," he murmured, and his fingers were threading her silken hair. "The pioneers, your dad and mine, had their way. We'll go on for better times, and a better land—peopled by honest men. And— Will you marry me, Milly?"

Her soft, quiet answer filled him with a joy he had never hoped to know.

THE END

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(Continued from page 78)

which, although it didn't pay much, was important and necessary for the development of the frontier. Therefore, he had nothing to be ashamed of, and every right to think what he wanted to.

As he neared The Gusher, the boardwalk became more crowded. Men and women smiled and said, "Mornin', sheriff. Nice day, isn't it?"—"Glad to see you up and around again, sheriff. We was sure worried about you for a while!"—"We're kinda thinkin' about givin' a little party in your honor, sheriff. That is if you feel up to it. How about it?"

With each encounter, Lew experienced a feeling of growing warmth. For the first time in two years, he was respected and liked. People looked up to him for protection against the lawless elements.

Subconsciously, his footsteps quickened. As he neared The Gusher, his shoulders squared and he walked with the firm step of a man who, for the first time in his life, was sure of himself and his objective—the objective being, at the moment, to settle down to the serious business of courting Gail Saunders.

And from luxurious living quarters above The Gusher, Gail Saunders watched the tall, slim man swinging across the street with a pounding heart. And sensing the purpose of his visit, she dashed to her dressing table and began to make herself even more lovely than she already was.

She stood regarding herself in the mirror a moment. Then a slow smile curved her full lips. Every woman was entitled to keep a few secrets, even from her future husband. And she was determined that Lew Walters should never know that Slim Edwards' bullet had missed her by at least a foot the night of that fight.

Her little act had worked out just as she had planned it. For Lew, thinking an innocent woman had been killed, had forgotten his fear of Mason and proved himself. That was what counted; the rest was best forgotten.

Only Doc Hayes knew her secret, and Doc Hayes never talked!

Lew Walters, trembling slightly, mounted the steps and knocked on the door of Gail Saunders' private quarters.

THE END

RAMROD OF THE ROCKY PEAKS

(Continued from page 85)

Haines glowed inwardly as he observed the cunning with which his friend Ramrod fainted and drew his big opponent off guard. It was obvious that the little king buck of Green River had recovered his strength.

Ramrod was at the peak of his form. His sides were lean and his muscles strong as he whipped to one side, half stumbling—a ruse to draw his enemy in. As the rival buck was drawn into the trap, Ramrod galvanized to swift action to stretch and thrust, and both the watching men licked their drying lips as they saw the expertness with which the doughty Ramrod found his target. He had thrust his horns so that now he had a tight pincers hold on the neck of his opponent. Those deadly curved horns were ready to go to work.

Haines grinned faintly as he watched the king buck's injured ear begin to flop, and then suddenly the Ramrod whirled, putting all the strength of his body into the action.

He sent the rival buck spinning, toppling and before the stranger could recover, the Ramrod rushed to strike with a passionate terrible fury.

Ramrod reared and chopped. He thrust and hooked, battering and ripping until the would-be usurper recovered to drag his beaten form off into the deeps of a wild fruit thicket.

Ramrod blew shrilly. He stomped choppy to a hummock there to stand, head erect as he grunted and blew his challenges.

Ted Haines chuckled softly and squeezed Cowley's arm.

"You see what I mean, Cowley?" he whispered huskily. "Now let's hightail it. If I don't miss my guess, Ramrod's got some mighty important unfinished business to attend to. Somethin's he don't intend to let no man watch."

Haines' voice had carried to Ramrod's keen ears. Ramrod bounded high, swung into the brush cover, off to his band.

Soon, while still blowing hard, he was thrusting young stock from his path then as the moon broke in on the small clearing, bathing the entire hinterland, the little king buck raised his head, curled his upper lip and whistled, once again king of the Green River pronghorns, monarch of a vanishing but proud race of creatures too fine to last long in this bitter, ruthless wilderness. . .



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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 107)

A weight hit the porch, the door shoved open, and Tom Wyler came into the room. "So he kicked the bucket. And I'd of sworn I heard him talking, a minute ago."

Ashrow caught the warning look in Dunder's eyes.

"You did," he said, "till Dunder stopped it with his fist. And he might have been all right if he'd kept his nerve. Cribs was dying of cerebral hemorrhage. It was renewed pressure on his speech center that made him talk. But it was mechanical, disconnected, simply stray thoughts playing in the damaged brain. It might have pointed suspicion in a court as fair-minded as the one that let Dunder off the first time, but it wouldn't have been legal evidence."

Ashrow had drawn it out, holding Dunder's attention while Wyler shucked out of his hampering slicker.

Then Ashrow put his final words: "This is irrefutable. See the blood on Dunder's hand?"

Wert Dunder jerked up his hand. Then command returned, and he was like a tricked, trapped animal. Outrage and fear heated his eyes as the hand shoved down. Ashrow moved sideways. He heard guns exploding, and his vision reeled. He caught balance and stared.

Dunder was down on his belly, his left arm twisted under him, the other shoved ahead on the floor near a loosened gun.

Wyler, pale and with a smoking gun in his hand, bent over Dunder.

"God!" Ashrow breathed. "If you hadn't been ready, Tom—!"

"But I was. And, hell, he ain't got any blood on his hand."

"Not in a literal sense," Ashrow said.

Neil Ashrow slept late the next day, which was a rare luxury. Coming drowsily into the kitchen around two in the afternoon, he discovered Cecily.

"Oh, Neil! Tom Wyler was just here and told me. It's a miracle."

Ashrow digested it. "No, only a simple chain of cause and effect."

Cecily drew back, scanning his face. "I think I glimpsed it, when Tom told me. For the first time. Don't ever let me lose it again."

She said no more, but her meaning was clear to Ashrow.

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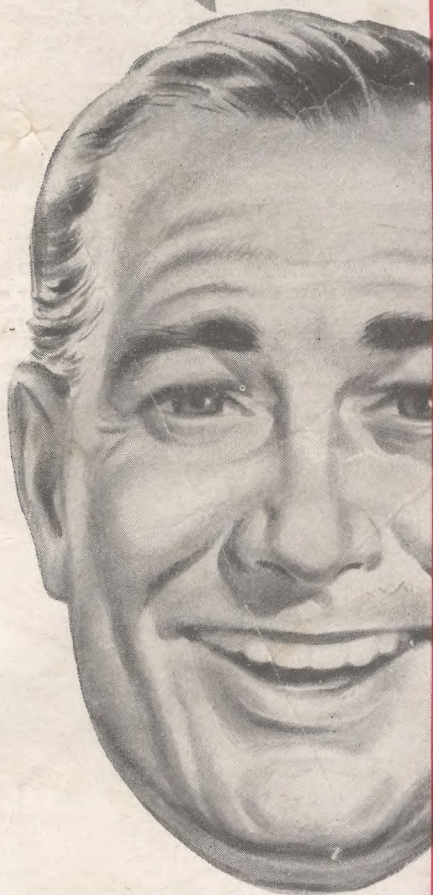
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